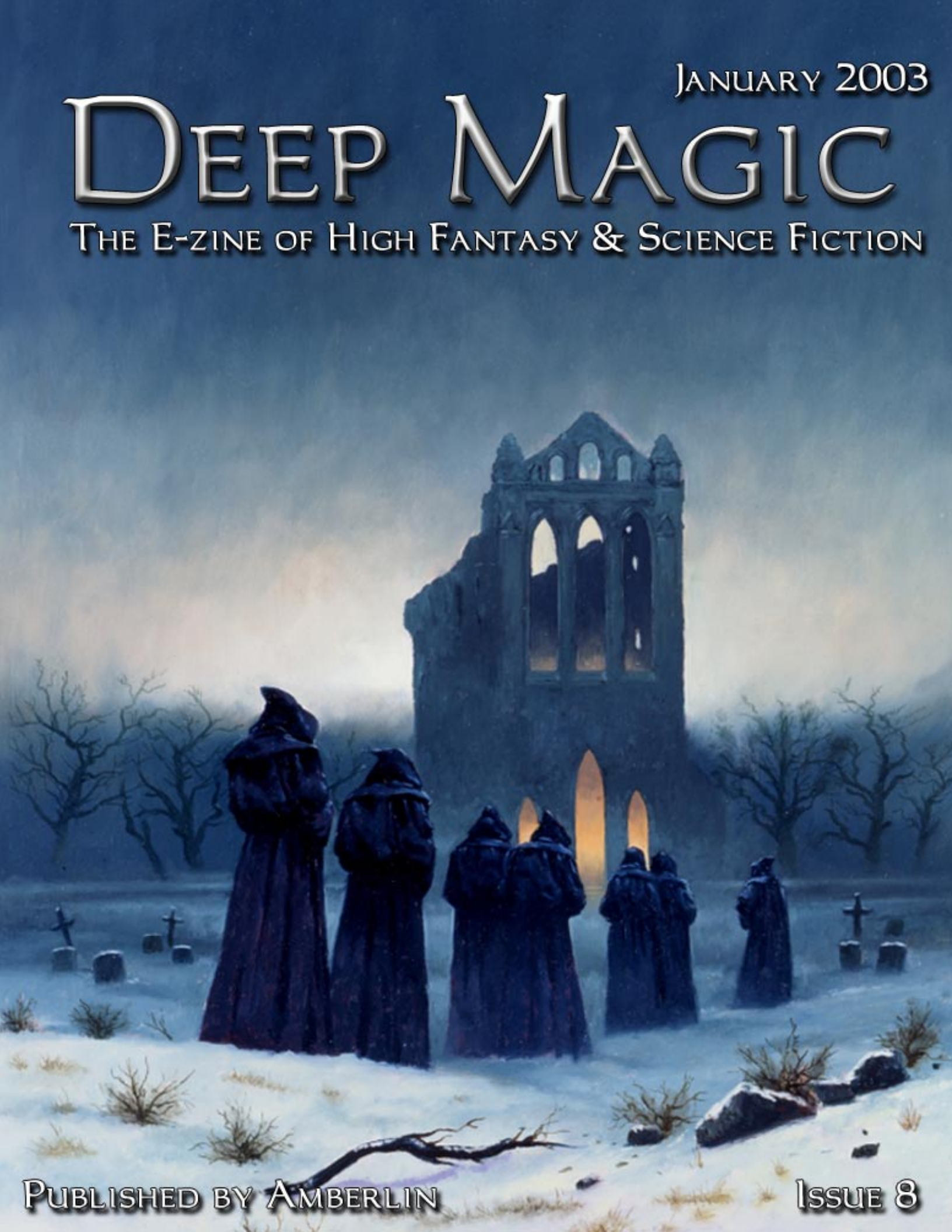
January 2003

Deep Magic

The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction



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"*The List of Seven*"

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Note from the Editors

January 2003

Happy New Year from all of us at DEEP MAGIC.

We were hoping to start off January with some special enchantment, and I think you will agree that we've pulled off a little extra magic this month. Recently, we received an e-mail request from a reader asking us to write an article on the entire writing process – from brainstorming to submitting to publishing. Of course, such a topic could not be adequately handled in a single article, so we put our heads together to deliver a series this month that rises to the challenge and should please you – whether you're a Dungeon Master, a writer, or even a devoted reader.

But we won't stop there. We also have some fresh stories this month that will delight you. First, we have *Counting Coup* by Gary Allen, a perilous fantasy tale that explores a dangerous culture. Then we have new-comer Boyd Richardson experimenting with magic in the tale *Learning to Fly.* And finally, Steven Richards (author of *Bliss*, November 2002) returns with a science fiction warning about going *One Step Too Far.*

This month also begins a new fantasy novel, *Tears of Minya*, by Jeff Wheeler, author of *Landmoor*. We invite you to wander the interesting and dangerous streets of the city of Minya with us. In the coming months, we hope to start up some other novel serializations as well.

For our cover artist, we tapped the talents of Les Edwards and also pulled in Jeremy McHugh as our interior artist. From the artwork poll we did last month, we have seen your favorites. And we have just as many impressive artists signed up for future months.

We will conclude this greeting with a special word about the "Best Science Fiction Movie" poll. The volume of voters has been overwhelming. At last we have come to the final round. Some serious contenders were knocked off the list. It is time at last to vote and determine the best science fiction movies of all time.

January is a good month to make New Year resolutions. We hope one of yours (if you're a writer) is to work on a story that you'll submit to Deep Magic. If you are afraid of rejection, don't be! We don't bite. Try submitting to a Writing Challenge to work up to a full-length story or novella. For the rest of you, tell a friend about Deep Magic this year. Our reach is growing every month, thanks to you.

The Editors
DEEP MAGIC

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Well, our December writing challenge was by far our most successful. We had a large number of submission, and for the first time will be printing four selections. Click the titles below to read them. This month we have another fun challenge, so send us your submissions by the 20th to writingchallenge@amberlin.com.

Dragon Dung by David Adams
Greenridge by Duane B. Frazure
The Spice Merchant's Tale by Keith Sloan
The Tome of Husks by Jared Rogers

January 2003 Writing Challenge

So you think you're funny? Oh sure, maybe your college buddies thought your fart jokes should have won a Pulitzer. But it takes a special something to put humor down on the page. Sometimes that's nothing more than a twisted sense of reality, other times it's legitimate talent. You may have noticed we like a little levity here at Deep Magic occasionally. This month's challenge, in preparation for our Humor Issue, is to be funny. That's it. Simple. It can be a line, a paragraph, or a page. Give us your best literary punchline. Tell us about your hero who found out his/her magical talents lie solely in the culinary arts. (Back Evil Usurper, or I shall unleash the full power of my magical quiche on thee!) Try to keep it under 500 words. But if it's REALLY funny, we'll keep reading past that. No knock-knock jokes please. If we choose your work, you'll find yourself sharing page-space with some of the funniest folk fantasy has to foffer. Er, offer.

December 2002 Writing Challenge: How long will you give a new author to "hook" you with her story? If you are reading a thick hardback that you paid $27.99 for on the beaming recommendation of a trusted friend, you may give the book many pages, if not chapters, to grab your attention. What if it is a tattered paperback in a stack of eight that you checked out from the public library? Certainly not as many. If you are reading a short story on the internet, the author better write something that stirs your interest on the first page. The writing challenge this month is to craft the first page or two of a story in a way that will draw the reader's interest and make them want to keep turning the pages. It can be the beginning of a short story, full novel, or epic series. Write something that will make a reader want more. We're not suggesting that you need to create a whole, drawn-out mystery in three paragraphs. Just that you pull us into a scene that offers enough of a "hook" to go on. How you do that is up to you. We look forward to reading your new beginnings.

Dragon Dung
By David Adams

Nothing says 'my life sucks' like a large goop of dragon dung stuck to the bottom of your boots. Except perhaps not noticing you've tracked it through the house. And, of course, to top that off with not realizing you've done it before your wife sees it.

"What in the name of Zeus' donkey did you track through this house!" shrieked my beautiful maiden. And believe me, when she gets all 280-plus pounds of her behind it…well, let's just say that Dirk down the street heard it. Lucky snake. I wish I had been down the street at the time.

"It's nothing, dear. Just bringing some work home," I answered, a little more meekly than I had intended. It's not that I'm afraid of my wife, but really, I've met dragons with a more pleasant demeanor. Oh, I love my wife and all. Really. She tells me so all the time. It's just that, well, she's a bit domineering. And not in the good way.

She came out from the kitchen, he tattered apron tied around her waist. It fit more like an undergarment made for a…well, more slender woman. How that thing can stretch that far around and still tie in the back is beyond me. And she's not wearing much underneath it. By the gods, I hope the ties don't break. Not now. The dragon dung is bad enough.

With a scowl that usually doesn't show for at least a couple hours after I've come home, my queen laid in to me. "Do you have any idea what it takes to clean this house without you tracking your work in after you? Do you?! I have half a mind to beat you with this spoon until your head cracks!" And there was the spoon. It was her spoon. She always seemed to have it in her hand. More like a shovel if you ask me. And it does hurt.

"I'm sorry, pet. I really am." My wife's name is Petunia. Pet for short. "It was just a lousy day at work. I swear I'll clean it up tonight." I took a couple steps back as I spoke. That spoon was waving a little too close for my safety.

She seemed to buy it. I thought her head was going to explode, but the color dropped down closer to normal and she turned with a huff back to the kitchen. I think I heard her mumble something about a 'good for nothin' but I'm not sure. At last, peace. Just me and my dung.

***

"Oow! That's cursed lizard singed me!"

That was Garrin. I turned to see him jumping around, looking for a place to cool off. I could smell the burnt hair. It was a pleasant change. "Drop and roll, Garrin!" I shouted to him. And without thinking, he did. I almost broke a rib laughing so hard. Seeing a grown man willingly roll around in dragon manure was a sight to behold.

I turned my attention to the baby drake walking away, a little smoke rising from her large nostrils. I'd swear that dragon was laughing. She walked back to the far side of the pen and plopped down with a squish, mud and dung spraying out from underneath her. That was one mean little drake. I call her Petunia.

A clomp of foul-smelling poop sailed past my nose, narrowly missing me. I turned to see Garrin, his face red as an apple. "I ought to feed you to the lizard, you mule!"

"Relax. You're not on fire anymore, right?" I turned back to the pile of filth I was shoveling, eager to finish. The wizards were coming back soon, and I wanted this done before then. There's nothing grumpier than a flock of wizards. Especially on a day like this one, when the King was to be hung from the gallows. Strange times these are. Looking back, I should have let my wife beat me with that spoon.

Greenridge

By Duane B. Frazure

On a late summer evening in Haltreeg Village, Thiesen's hammer rang out with the regularity of a pendulum. The forge fires radiated like a fever as Thiesen straightened out the center pole for the mount with a medium sledge. His dirty shirt dripped with sweat; beads ran down the heavy leather smock, which was slick with oils and water. The room stunk. Small, smoke-filled and locked tighter than a princess' chastity belt, it was even part fortress and dungeon. Thiesen intended to keep his newest weapon out of the sight of others. At least until after he used it.

The half-penny shafts had shattered upon release every time, and the whole-penny shafts only made it past release half the time. When they had, their course of flight was unpredictable. After Thiesen realized the guide was shearing off one feather, he tried to straighten the arrows' flight by using only two feathers on opposite sides of the shafts. That helped a little, but the force of the bow was still too great. Tonight he would use longer shafts as thick as his thumb, made from heat-treated oak and steel feathers he crafted himself.

Thiesen's heart would never recover from losing Ginny, but it would feel some measure of relief when he exacted his revenge. His sooty face curved into a smile as the center pole slipped perfectly into its socket. With the base complete, he was ready to give the bow an outdoor trial. He was nervous to take it out of the forge, but the new arrows would likely blast a hole through the wall. Besides, the galley room was not large enough to test range. He chuckled as he hefted the pieces of the bow into a coffin-like strong-box he had made to carry the weapon. Even the pieces were heavy.

Bears. It had to be. The Greenridge was home to hibercats and other predators, but the only beast large enough to smash through their small mountain cabin was a Greenridge Bear. The place had been demolished. Had he his wits when he discovered it, he would have searched for fur or tracks or other bear signs, but he lost himself that day. Mayhap, when he killed his first bear, he would recover a part of what he lost. But all he could think about that day was Ginny.

As he pushed the sturdy cart holding the bow, he organized his thoughts and slated out a basic plan for the upcoming days. If the new arrows worked, he would make a half dozen of them the next day and head out for the mountains the following morning. A snap and the near collapse of the cart elicited a sharp "Hellstones!" from Thiesen. The left forewheel had been cracked for nearly a year and he kept putting off fixing it. Putting things off had cost him enough. He was supposed to have met Ginny the night before she disappeared, but Rial Plammet had caught up with him before he had left town and demanded completion of a the iron cookstove he had paid Thiesen to complete the month before. No cookstove was worth losing Ginny, but that was what had happened. Now, the wheel would have to be replaced. At least the box hadn't fallen to the floor.

As Thiesen hastily cut a new wheel out of a wrist-thick slab of Maplewood, he entertained a dark thought. Perhaps he should use the bow on Rial after he killed a few bears. No, he was not really a violent man, but the thought was not unpleasant to him. He muttered complaints to himself that he could not find cheaper wood to make a wheel. That Maple would fetch him a better-than-fair price should he make a table out of it. He could still make a table, just a shorter one now. "Ah, now I can see the good in some things," he thought as he realized that in his rush to test the weapon he had forgotten to shut down the forge.

After clamping down the vents and opening the flue, Thiesen took a heavy file to the wheel to smooth out the rough spots. It would not need to be perfect, but it needed to roll. Shavings fell into a curly mound between his feet as he thought of the keen lever system that would make the bow desirable to others. He could arm the Queen's Guard in Lower Mephaneth with dozens of these. On

a parapet, this bow would replace those that operated with ratchets, gears, and cranks. It could be loaded in a quarter the time it took to load the others. Better yet, with the double cord-string, it was stronger too.

He would clean up the shavings later, Thiesen thought as he scampered to find a mallet. Moments later, he had broken off the remnants of the old wheel and fitted the new one on the cart. His throat longed for a drink of curry-ale and his nose longed for a change of shirt, but his thirst and odor would remain as he had time to cure neither. Light was fading and he wanted to get to the grove just north of the main trail before dark.

Sunlight faded and wind rustled through the hickory wood to his left as Thiesen guided his gelding, Trott-hopper, off the main trail. Before disappearing into the grove, he checked the road both ways. He would keep his secret for now. Wagon wheels creaked and popped as Thiesen led the way over uneven ground, through trees, and toward a clearing. Twice, he had to move fallen limbs and once, back Trott-hopper up and redirect their path.

Lighting the second lantern, Thiesen removed a ham-sized gourd from a woven basket and walked across the clearing to a stump a hundred paces away at the base of a mound. Chickaw grass brushed his boots as he went. "Hellstones!" he cursed upon reaching the stump. Its top had rotted and was hollow; the gourd would fall in or fall off, but not rest atop as he had planned. Searching around, he found a few short sticks and fashioned them into a brace on the stump. Leaving the second lantern at the base of the stump, he returned to set up the bow.

The mount went together easily, its four legs locked into place with keypins. With the center pole resting in it's socket, Thiesen unwrapped the steel-reinforced mahogany mainpiece. It slid smoothly into place and then swiveled and clicked as Thiesen positioned it horizontally. Two more key pins and it was secure. Metal screeched as he tried to turn the bow on the center pole. Cursing, he took his first lantern to the wagon and sorted through a bundle of rags until he found his oil bottle. After applying a liberal amount, the bow turned smoothly without making the horrible noise. To adjust the vertical aim, Thiesen turned a dial on the slide near the center pole.

Finally, it was time for the arrow. Loading it satisfied Thiesen as though he had already exacted a measure of revenge. Careful to make sure neither steel feather would catch on the guide, he took careful aim at the gourd, and then pulled the first lever. It was stiffer than his right knee before a rainstorm. Muscles strained as first one and then the other cable stretched into the initial resting place. Had he pulled on the second lever to move the first cable to the final position without stepping in the second, the cable would have snapped. But after engaging the second lever, the cables drew tight and he readjusted the arrow. The whole process went quickly.

Thiesen's heart beat loudly as he made the final aiming adjustments. It would have been easier in daylight, but he had not finished in time. Then, there was that wheel on the cart. With the second lantern glowing across the clearing, he took a deep breath and stared down the shaft of his single arrow. Then, he pulled the trigger. The twang was much deeper than that of a normal crossbow, and the force of the release shook the mount. The arrow shot across the field, on line with the gourd, but landed a few paces short of the stump.

Hooting out with satisfaction that the bow worked, Thiesen retrieved a spade from the wagon and went to find the arrow. The hard, black soil broke reluctantly into clods as Thiesen worked. His body was warm with the effort, but the coolness of evening brought a drip to his nose and numbed his fingers.

Before Thiesen could free the arrow, Trotthopper neighed out in panic. In the dark, Thiesen could only see the outline of the horse struggling to free itself from the wagon. It was spooked. He felt the hair on his neck tingle and scanned the trees desperately to see what had spooked his horse.

The Spice Merchant's Tale

By Keith Sloan

It was the last night of the Feast of Hakalim when Hasdrubel reached the ancient city of Bas-ra-shakir, gem of the Ophirim Desert. He had long been on the road, a spice merchant from distant Oran in the west, trading along the ancient desert roads. But desert bandits had attacked his caravan three days past, and only Hasdrubel and a lone servant had escaped into the desert. Once a rich man with many servants, the merchant had been left penniless, far from home. Indeed, even his loyal servant had failed him, succumbing to the heat of the desert after only two days. Thus it was that Hasdrubel alone reached the great city.

It was a time of great merriment in Bas-ra-shakir, for the feast of Hakalim celebrated the defeat of invading tribes in the city's dim past. Wine and delicate foods were everywhere in profusion, and the people of the city forgot their old grievances and hates for one night. It was a time of joy for all.

And the people of Bas-ra-shakir welcomed the weary and wounded traveler among them, such was their festive mood. And they gave him fiery wines to drink, and fine meats to eat. And for a time Hasdrubel forgot his woes and reveled with the city dwellers in their delights. And he partook of their entertainments, marveling as men swallowed swords while others walked on beds of fire. He clapped madly as troupes of beautiful dancing girls moved through the streets, clad only in garlands of desert flowers. A round-headed man gave him the honor of hurtling the first spear at one of several nomad tribesmen captured just for this festival. And he fell asleep in the arms of a black-eyed beauty of the city, is mind swimming in the effects of wine and opium.

Hasdrubel awoke with a wincing pain from a boot kicking his side. His head blurred in the lingering pain from his night of revelry, and he opened his eyes to the painful morning light. He tried to croak a protest, but his voice cracked into gibberish.

"Get up and begone, scum," came the voice of the booted man.

Hasdrubel opened his eyes further. He lay in the street where he'd fallen asleep, his paramour gone without a sign. A few others walked the street where he'd fallen, their steps slow and silent. The boot kicked him harder. "Begone, beggar. Earn your bread elsewhere." Hasdrubel now recognized him as the round-headed man from the previous night. Gone was the look of friendly joviality, replaced by grim unrecognition and disgust. "Go or I shall have you beaten by the Guard."

Hasdrubel stood, considered words, but turned and walked off unsteadily. Every sign of the night's feasting had vanished, leaving dreary streets and sullen people. No one acknowledged him, and he wondered much at the sudden change in the city.

His hunger grew with the day's light, but except for a few baubles, he had naught of value on his person. And though not highborn, he would die rather than beg. So he simply traversed the city, hoping for he knew not what, his eyes downcast both from the bright sun and the scorn in the faces of people of Bas-ra-shakir. Despair rose in his breast, and he thought to leave the city and die in the desert, alone, but with his pride intact. His thoughts turned to darkness at the cruelties of the world, and of the many wrongs done to him, the cold disdain of Bas-ra-shakir not the least among them.

"What do you seek friend?" asked a slithery voice form the shadows. Hasdrubel looked up. He had wandered into a dark alley, devoid of traffic, though a scent of strange incense wafted through it. Before him stood a figure darkly hooded, its features inscrutable beneath its dark clothing. "What is it you seek?" the figure asked again, oddly insistent and eager.

"I am Hasdrubel, of late a merchant, but now beggared by the vagaries of chance. I seek..." He trailed off, unsure of his answer.

"You seek revenge," the figure said. "You seek restoration and aggrandizement. You seek us."

The Tome of Husks

By Jared Rogers

Andando fairly skipped down King's Street. The westering sun shone in his eyes, but this day he thought no more of it than to remark to himself how crisp and fresh it made the city look. He smiled as he took in a deep breath through his nose. It had been a long night of frustration and trial and error, but Andando had at last broken the cipher and unlocked the tome. *Such wonders*, he thought to himself. He couldn't remember much of what he had read; he had been so excited, but vague mists of concepts faded in and out of his mind as he walked.

"Hullo, Andando!" the voice brought the young man to a stop. He turned to the sound of approaching steps.

"A wonderfull evening, eh Frell?" Andando clasped his friend's hand.

"I just said as much to you a moment ago, and you walked on by like I was a ghost." His friend's eyes had wrinkles of worry about them. "Are you fine, Andando?"

"Fine? I can say I am more than fine!" Frell seemed to relaxe his concern, "Do you remember the tome I told you about yesterday, the one I intended to steal from the repository?"

Frell stepped closer, for some passerby had turned their heads at "steal." "Sure I do. Keep it down" he replied in a whisper, "but that was four days ago, not yesterday."

Andando laughed. Then he saw the wrinkles about his friend's eyes returning, and he saw that Frell was not joking. Four days, he thought to himself, that can't be right. He was sure he had only read the book for two or three candles and then fallen asleep.

"Walk with me, " he said to his friend. And they continued on the King's Street towards Willow Market.

"I would not hold from you any tale of daring or death that I had done. You must tell me what you discovered and where you have been." A mock expression of jealousy could not hide the faint glimmer of worry that lingered behind Frell's face. Andando said nothing. He was sure Frell would not lie to him, not after all they had been through. Four days?! It didn't seem possible.

"Maybe opening the book drained me of such strength that I have slept for three days. I swear that nothing has happened. I stole the book, spent many hours unlocking it's binding cypher, then glanced through it for one or two candles and fell asleep."

Frell said nothing in return and they walked unspeaking through the noisy streets of Murliz. When they reached the center of Willow Square they stopped.

Andando turned to his friend. A wispy golden smoke seemed to float out from an unseen hole in Frell's chest. He looked around at the people close by and saw evidence of other invisible fires. Without wondering, he knew. He could see their souls. A little girl near him began to cry, pointing at his left hand. He looked down and time seemed to slow; it became a wide lazy river. Andando heard only ringing in his ears as he looked upon the taloned, black claw where his hand had been.

Why did I come to Willow Square? He thought absently. He knew he was changing, though he couldn't feel it. He could hardly see or hear now.

Terror welled up inside of him. He knew why he had come here.

"Frell, please help me! I know why I came here!"

A brilliant flash of ivory light sent his senses floating. He knew he wasn't dead, only in a kind of sleep. Someone had enspelled him to stop the change, to put him in a stasis. He knew he would wake soon, and a glimmer of hope focused his mind. The hope that he might lift whatever curse the tome had laid on him.

Poll: The Best SciFi Movie of All Time Final Round

Round Two is in the books, and there were certainly some surprises. Stargate pulled out the biggest upset by knocking off 2001: A Space Odyssey and Close Encounters of the Third Kind. And Men In Black won the closest of all the brackets. It edged out E.T., Contact, and Signs, all of which were separated by a few votes. There were also some not-so-surprising results. Star Wars and The Matrix move into the final round as clear favorites. However, nothing is a sure thing. This round has been our most successful poll yet. So now we're ready for the last round. The top ten will face off in a unique round of voting. So here's what we're going to do:

When you go to the poll, you will see all ten movies with checkboxes next to them. Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to select your favorite three movies on the list. However, you can also pick only one or two. It's up to you. When it is over, we will tally up all the votes for each movie and rank them, from one to ten, according to your selections. The Deep Magic Top Ten SciFi Movies list will be official. Any guesses which movie will win? We have some ideas, but you have surprised us already in this poll, so we'll see. If the top movies are close enough, we may choose to have a run-off next month between those movies.

Would you like to see the results of last month's round? View them here. They were truly interesting. Now without further ado, we present the final round of The SciFi Movie Tournament Poll.

Bonus Poll:

Well, we couldn't help it. With Two Towers out, we just had to ask about your favorite parts of the movie, as well as your favorite characters.. Most of the characters returned from the first installment, but there were some new ones as well. So let us know what you liked best.

Vote.

Go to the SciFi Tournament Poll

Our poll sponsored by csPoller. They provided us a great poll script, so please go to their site and check out their great scripts. They offer a wide selection of quality cgi-scripts, and their support is fantastic.

Counting Coup
By Gary Allen

"I can't hear the beat of drums anymore without thinking of those days," the old man observed with a ghost of a smile as he stared out through the window. Looking around to eye his apprentice, who was furiously transcribing his words, Edel sighed, "Take heed, little Boel, memory is a strange thing. Events and decisions that seem unremarkable in your youth can haunt the last days of your life. Regret is a bitter pill for an old man to swallow." Still new enough to the Order to be uncomfortable in his habit and in the company of elders, Boel fidgeted for a moment before peering up at his master, a confused frown marring his youthful features. The old man could see the question forming on the young man's lips, and he smiled in anticipation, pleased to have a witness to the tale. It was some time before the apprentice finished chewing upon his question, a trait he would have to learn to outgrow if he hoped to serve Prosperity.

"Regret, master?" he finally asked.

Edel turned back to the window and the spectacular mountain panorama and nodded, "Oh yes, terrible regret."

Becoming more intrigued by the moment, the young man grinned, "Will you tell me?"

After flashing a bemused expression at Boel, Edel motioned to the open page and idle quill, "That is what we do."

Events and decisions that seem unremarkable in your youth can haunt the last days of your life. Regret is a bitter pill for an old man to swallow.

* * *

The companions stood out of the way to one side with their mule and gear as the raiding party strode past. The warriors, male and female alike, wore only a boiled leather cuirass and fur skirt, leaving their chests bare. The apprentice blushed at the sight of almost naked women marching past, indifferent to the bitter cold or his scrutiny. Embarrassed and unsure what he was supposed to do, the young man looked away and cuffed the ground with his boots.

"You miss important details, young Edel. That is no way to serve Prosperity," the old man chided in a good-humored tone, understanding only too well his apprentice's discomfort. Edel was still new enough to the Order to react first as a man, and still young enough to be incapable of concealing his unspoken temptations. In contrast, Uren was experienced enough to be circumspect about his manly urges. "Pay attention," the balding pilgrim instructed. Scarlet from crown to fingertips, Edel turned to watch the last of the warriors march past. They were all covered head to toe with harsh tattoos. Nothing like the artistic and subtle bodyrunes of the Cûn; these were brutal sweeps and shapes. The Jahd were a warrior people, fierce and barbaric. This column of swaggering warriors bore a terrifying assortment of arms, some wore shields or greaves and vambraces, but no helms or other armor. Despite the fact not one Jahd stood much under seven feet, they moved with the grace and power of the beardogs they domesticated. They were glorious to behold, but the Jahd made no secret of their animosity towards the people of Ilesh, which was utmost on Edel's mind, as

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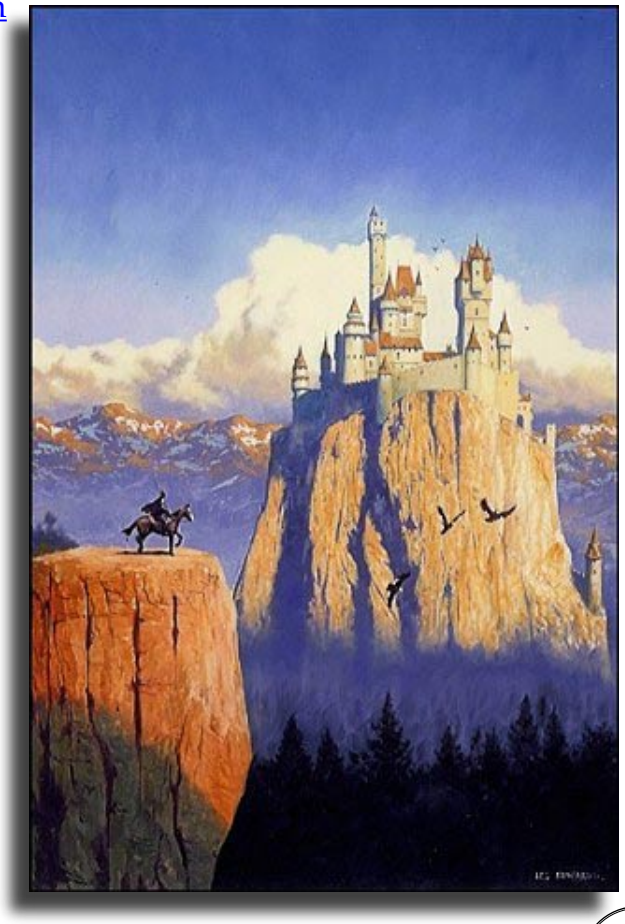
Feature Artist
Les Edwards

Name: Les Edwards (aka Edward Miller)
Age: 53
Residence: Ilford, Essex, UK
Marital Status: Married (happily)
Children: None (happily)
Hobbies: Playing the guitar, fencing, half-building plastic model kits
Favourite Book: too many, but if I have to pick one: The War of the Worlds - H.G. Welles
Started Painting In: My infancy, but professionaly about 1973
Artist Most Inspired By: too many to list
Mediums: Oils, unless I'm painting as Edward Miller in which case I use acrylics
Education: Local Grammar School; Hornsey College of Art 1968-72
Where Published: All major UK publishers, most major US publishers. various advertising campaigns, movie posters

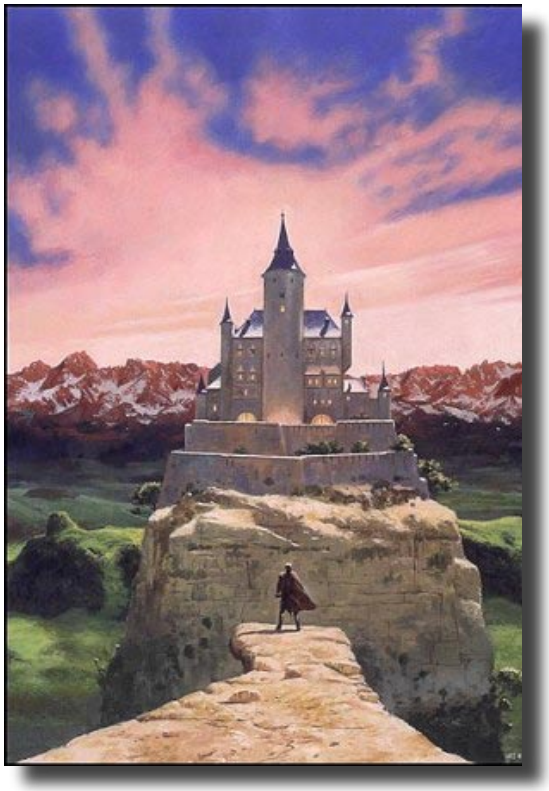
Where to Buy Artwork or Contact: www.lesedwards.com or www.wow-art.com



Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I've always drawn and painted for as long as I can remember, so it was a natural progression to go to Art school. I studied Graphic Design, which in those days, before computers, mostly involved arranging little bits of paper and sticking them down with a rubber adhesive. After a while, I realised I wasn't cut out for this and went back to making pictures instead, much to the disgust of my tutors. When I left college, I was taken on by an illustration agency called "Young Artists" and began my professional life.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: I hope it's dramatic. I've always tried to infuse everything I paint with a sense of drama, not just in the use of lighting and composition, but trying to give the impression of action or of something about to happen. A bit like a film still I suppose.

Feature Artist: Les Edwards



Q: Where do you get your inspiration?
A: If I'm doing a book jacket, obviously from the book itself, if I get the chance to read it. Often, however, the publisher will specify exactly what they want on the cover and I don't get to see the manuscript. I tend to see everything in terms of pictures, so inspiration comes from all around. I'm very impressionable and stuff from movies or TV or my latest visit to a gallery finds it's way into my painting.

Q: What inspired this piece?
A: The List of Seven was a book by Mark Frost. The Art Editor wanted a piece capturing the feel of the work of Caspar David Friedrich, a romantic 19th century artist. I was already familiar with Friedrich's work, so I just tried to distill some of the major elements and apply them to my painting. It turned out to be a very popular picture and it's still in my portfolio. Oddly enough, although people always remark on it, I've never been asked to do anything similar. The artwork was sold some time ago, but I still get inquiries asking if it's for sale.

Q: What has been your greatest success?
A: Probably the fact that I'm still working after nearly 30 years. Not many people get to make a career out of something they love doing, and a lot of very talented illustrators fall by the wayside. It's increasingly tough as less and less illustration is being used. I've been extremely lucky.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the SF/Fantasy genre?
A: I think for some time the trend in SF and Fantasy illustration has been towards more technical sophistication. There are some painters with great facility in the genre. I can't help feeling, however, that everyone is recycling the same old thing (I include myself in this). However beautifully executed, a guy in a space suit still just looks like a guy in a space suit and probably could have been painted any time in the last ten years. There doesn't seem to be any real innovation at the moment. We need a Frazetta or Foss to come along and make us see things afresh. I thought that the future of Fantasy illustration would be digital, but there only seem to be a couple of people who've really got that together, and I'm sensing a bit of a backlash against computer artwork amongst art editors. The time is right for a change.

The Writing Craft series
Article 1: Brainstorming
By Jeff Wheeler

It starts as a little itch that doesn't go away after you scratch it. Often the itch grows into a huge bump, and sometimes it bleeds. I'm not talking about mosquito bites, though the symptoms are shared and they often carry bizarre diseases. I'm talking about the writing itch. The bug. The fever. Not everyone gets it, and not everyone who has it wants it -- this mental compulsion that can keep you up at night, squirming and tossing until the words tap from your fingers onto a keyboard, or scratch their way loose from your mind into a spiral notebook.

At heart, a writer may be a novelist – a person biologically unable to create a story with less than thirty chapters or, in the case of Robert Jordan, thirty books. A writer may also only be a short-story teller – a person who doesn't have the patience for anything longer than fourteen pages. Even a Dungeon Master is a writer of sorts – an author who lets the characters choose their own fates.

But where, pray tell, do the stories come from? They are not microwave pizzas you pull out of the freezer and nuke for three minutes.

This article will discuss one of the aspects of creating a story – and that's the brainstorming part of it. To me, one of the most enjoyable things about being a writer is generating concepts and ideas and taming these seething things into a coherent fashion. You use words to capture these ideas and bind them. Sometimes they wriggle free and run loose. Often it's like herding cats.

So, where do we get started? That depends.

Before suggesting some tips for brainstorming stories, I would like to call your attention to a device called Feralt's Triangle. For our astute readers who went through the guts of the December 2002 issue of Deep Magic, this should be a familiar term, as it was referenced in David Farland's article. You see, stories should have several distinct elements. If they don't, they are not stories. It's that simple.

A story consists of five major elements. I'll try to make this easy to understand. *The story has to start somewhere (#1).* It needs a beginning. *The story needs to go somewhere (#2).* It needs action. *The story needs to get there (#3)* – a moment where fate hangs in the balance. It needs a climax. *The story needs to wind down (#4).* It needs a denouement, or a resolution. *The story needs to end somewhere (#5).* It needs an ending.

Feralt's triangle is helpful because this basic structure is true regardless of whether you are writing a novel or a short story, or planning a D&D campaign.

Let me give you some examples.

Example #1:

"When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton." (Chapter 1, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, by J.R.R. Tolkien).

Beginning: starts in the Shire, introduces the main character Frodo Baggins.
Rising Action: Frodo starts his quest to Mt. Doom
Climax: Frodo reaches Mt. Doom as his friends are about to be destroyed. (I won't ruin the climax by telling you what it was, but it was very good.)
Denouement: Frodo journeys back to the Shire.
Conclusion: Frodo leaves the Shire for good.

Example #2:

"The sun was already sinking into the deep green of the hills to the west of the valley, the red and gray-pink of its shadows touching the corners of the land, when Flick Ohmsford began his descent." (Chapter 1, *The Sword of Shannara*, by Terry Brooks).

Beginning: starts in Shady Vale, introduces the main character Shea Ohmsford.
Rising Action: Shea starts his quest to claim the Sword of Shannara
Climax: Shea hunts the Sword to the Skull Kingdom where he confronts the Warlock Lord
Denouement: Shea realizes he wasn't so perfect after all.
Conclusion: Shea and his brother return to Shady Vale.

Example #3:

"The first thing the boy Garion remembered was the kitchen at Faldor's farm. For the rest of his life he had a special warm feeling for kitchens and those peculiar sounds and smells that seemed somehow to combine into a bustling seriousness that had to do with love and food and comfort and security and, above all, home. No matter how high Garion rose in life, he never forgot that all his memories began in that kitchen." (Chapter 1, *The Belgariad*, by David Eddings).

Beginning: starts in Sendaria, introduces the main character Garion.
Rising Action: Garion is led on a quest without realizing it at first
Climax: Garion, a mortal, confronts Kal Torak, a god.
Denouement: Garion does not return to Sendaria…he has a new home by the end.
Conclusion: Garion starts a new life as a very important person.

Okay, so I just trivialized three of the greatest epics in the Fantasy genre. But that is exactly the point. The story does not have to end where it began. The characters don't have to travel 15,000 miles to reach their destination – it could be across the street. I like to look at stories in the context of a river. As a writer or a DM, you must help your reader/player-characters get in a boat on the river, take them somewhere, and then get them off the river again. And hopefully do it in such a manner that they didn't throw up along the way. Or fall asleep and miss the whole journey. As the storyteller, you must create the feeling that the river is taking them somewhere. Sometimes fast and churning. Sometimes languid. It's the feeling of the current you must create.

So, how does one create a story that accomplishes this?

The process is called brainstorming, for lack of a more original word. You must try to fill out Feralt's triangle – come up with the general, high-level plot that will give you the context for the five components. It's that context that will create the 'current' of the river. The great thing about brainstorming is that you can start with any of the five elements.

Here is a personal example.

When I brainstormed the story for the novel *Landmoor*, I originally started it with my main character, Thealos, meeting his mentor character, Jaerod, far away from home. That's where most fantasies began, I thought. Thealos had to meet the person who told him of his destiny. I knew what that destiny was at the beginning – it was the seed thought that started the whole story. Thealos meets Jaerod and then follows him to a specific location where his destiny can be fulfilled.

So, in reality, I started brainstorming at the **Climax.** I knew what Thealos had to do. Then I had to work backward to figure out how he got from his home to that point. I worked on the **Rising Action** next by figuring out different places Thealos would visit along the way (like a tavern in Sol, a distant trading post near the Shadows Wood, and how he and his companions would cross a sleeping army). Then I needed to figure out how to actually start the story. I wrote at least four different versions of how the story began, and with each version I kept moving the clock backward to earlier in Thealos' life. Finally I found a **Beginning** that I was happy with. I also knew that I wanted the story to **End** as a cliff-hanger, to set up action in Book 2. So I knew at the get-go that the true ending would not happen until the end of Book 2.

You see? You can start anywhere in the process. You might not know the climax of the story when you first start brainstorming. Instead, you might be fascinated with the setting – where the story takes place. Those seeds might create a great beginning for the story. That's okay, but remember--you shouldn't start *writing* the story if that's all you have. Your reader might be interested in the geography, political organization, or the way you have blue trees and red grass at first, but they won't feel the tug and pull of a plot current if there isn't one. So spend enough time brainstorming the five elements before you start writing.

In preparing for this article, I talked to several colleagues who are also writers – to be sure that my point of view on how brainstorming works was not the only opinion expressed.

The following comes from one of my best friends, who is also a fantasy writer. See how many of these ideas you can relate to:

Here is where I tend to get story ideas:

1. Lying in bed, waiting for sleep.
2. In the bathroom -- not the best image, I realize, but when you have two small children, you take your quiet moments where you can. (The point: in moments of solitude.)
3. Driving (usually by myself and more often when the scenery is interesting or late at night when there are no distractions).
4. At church. Okay, that sounds bad too, but sometimes when I'm sitting there and my mind wanders, ideas for stories start to flow. I make sure I have paper and pen whenever I go to church (it also comes in handy for games of tic-tac-toe with my son).
5. Camping. Since I write fantasy, being in the wilderness has a way of putting me in the right mindset.
6. Reading a good book (often, I'll put a good book down and mentally work through a story idea -- maybe even write it up or outline it on the computer before returning to the book).

Could you relate to any of these? Did any ring out to you? Knowing the times or instances when you are the most susceptible to creative impressions is helpful knowledge. Take advantage of those moments to brainstorm ideas.

Here is another shot at the same question from another colleague of mine:

Getting the ideas are well and good, but what about making sense of them? I make sure I write everything down that pops into my head concerning the story ideas, no matter how trivial. Later on, I may realize I jotted something down that was brilliant. You might want to consider some of the difference between "organic" writers, and "analytical" writers (I think that's what you might call them). Analytical writers will brainstorm in ways that are, well, analytical. I'm thinking T-charts here, with footnotes and such. An organic writer might try using some music to inspire them. I use certain pieces I've selected from movie soundtracks to get me in the mood. I brainstorm battle scenes to "Braveheart," etc. An organic writer would also be more likely to use the webbing method of brainstorming, just letting the thoughts flow.

I think what's important is that brainstorming is an activity with an intent. However you do it, at the end you should have some idea of where you want to go with it, which leads one on to the next step. Also, keeping a notebook handy at all times is a good idea. You never know where an idea will pop up. Some of my best characters came from riding the bus. I also tend to brainstorm best right before going to sleep, so I keep my notebook by the bed. As I brainstorm, I try to keep things "filed" so to speak. A page for characters, a page for scenes, a page for action, a page for dialogue excerpts, etc.

Are you seeing some common elements yet in brainstorming? To conclude, I will offer my own personal methods. Again, try to determine which might be right for you:

Personally, I get ideas all the time. Often while reading a book, I try to second-guess where the author is going with it. Most of the time, I'm wrong. But the process creates interesting new story ideas in my mind. What if the current went a different direction instead with different outcomes? Then all I would need to do is change the characters and the setting and there is the germ of a story.

One of the hardest things for me is to come up with new character or place names. I don't really have a problem coming up with plot details. So I also carry a notebook where I write down names that I see on street signs, maps, bumper stickers, license plates, or names that just pop into my head. One day, when my wife and I were driving to Monterrey California, the name of a wizard order came rushing into my mind. I asked my wife to pull out my planner (where I keep my names) and I dictated to her the spelling of that thought (she already knows I'm weird, so this is normal for her to have me dictate bizarre words out of thin air). When I'm creating a new world or developing a new character, I'll look at this huge list of names until the right one jumps out at me.

I would be remiss if I didn't suggest writing down some of your dreams as a potential for story material. Having that pen and paper nearby your bed is a great suggestion. When I was working night shift a few years ago, I had an incredibly vivid dream that was an entire fantasy story plotline. I woke up, groggy, and jotted down as many of the details as I could remember and then went back to bed. When my alarm clock woke me later, I could barely remember the dream – but the story and the idea had been saved. I would have lost it if I had not written it down. My planner has several pages devoted to unwritten stories and novels that I hope to get to someday. Dreams can be an excellent source.

Another place I highly recommend for brainstorming ideas is history. There is so much world-building material from our past that the internet allows you to tap into. Let me give you an example of just a few sources that are chock-full of details and ideas that may trigger a missing gap in Feralt's Triangle. These are not textbooks references, but original source material that has been translated into modern English:

The Goodman of Paris: http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/goodman.html (this is a medieval letter describing marriage relationships, how to keep fleas away from your bed, along with

old cooking recipes – a great source for details in describing a fantasy tavern or inn.)

Malleus Maleficarum (The Hammer of Witches): http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/mmtoc.html (this is a medieval how-to manual on detecting, prosecuting, and killing witches. It contains dozens of short story ideas, or setting ideas. Though it often reads like a fantasy novel, be forewarned that its authors were deadly serious about the topic.)

Gallic Wars by Julius Caesar: http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/caesar/index.htm (an ancient text on military tactics, as well as Caesar's descriptions of other cultures from a Roman point of view. It also has hundreds of names.)

A great website for other original source material is at Fordham University: http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook2.html

Baby-Name-Generator: http://www.baby-name-generator.com/Names.html (if you need to come up with a name in a pinch, there are thousands here to choose from)

I would like to say that there is no right and wrong in brainstorming. Just keep in mind that stealing someone else's ideas is called plagiarism. Unless they've been dead for five hundred years. Then it's called fantasy fiction.

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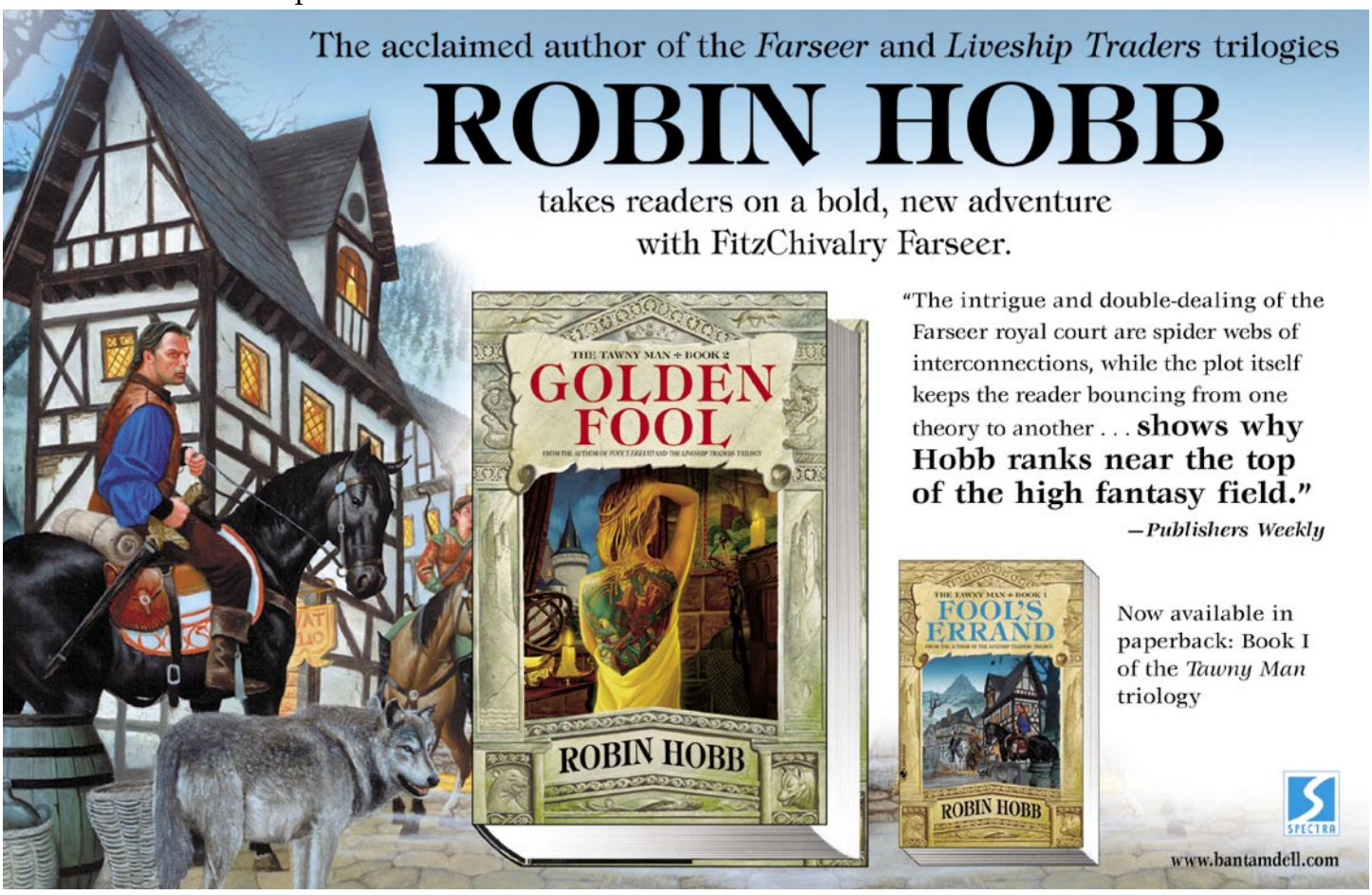
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The Writing Craft Series
Article 2: Writing the Story
By Brendon Taylor

So, you just had your epiphany for an amazing story. It might have come from a dream, inspiration on a nature hike, a vision while hiding out from the kids in a long, warm bath, or from any other source. You may have even written down a few notes, outlined the whole idea, or written a gripping introduction or prologue. The power behind the idea drove you at first, and you could not wait to put the story into print and claim your first Nebula (or even see your work published in Deep Magic). Now, the idea is hatched, but the work lies ahead. Whether your story is a five hundred page novel or a ten page story, you are now faced with the task of transforming your ideas into words that will in turn put your ideas into the minds of your readers.

How do you do that?

The simple answer is to write. Sit down and do it. Maybe that seems overly simple, but that is the only way your ideas will become a story that others can enjoy, short of taking the time to tell your story to each person individually. Keep writing until your story is finished and then type the words, "The End." It is an incredibly satisfying feeling.

Keep writing until your story is finished and then type the words, "The End." It is an incredibly satisfying feeling.

Although sitting down and writing until you are done is the simple, and most important, principal I will discuss in this article, there are many specific things to keep in mind as you write. The elements I will touch on include: plot, characters, setting, consistency, pacing, and climax.

Plot

That great idea, which led you to sit at your computer and start typing, may have included the entire plot from the beginning. If you are writing a relatively short story, that is possible. If you are writing something longer, you probably had a few great ideas, but unless you are a genius, your story will likely have many gaps. This is part of the writing process that I enjoy most of all. When I wrote Mortal Amusement, (May-July of this summer) I started with a kernel of the story, no characters, and many gaps in the plot. After writing ten pages, I conducted some research and realized that my original kernel, which was the idea behind the climax, would not work. As I wrote, the story evolved and I kept part of my original idea. My first ten pages became pages 25-35 as I wrote in some back-story and developed characters. Some pages were deleted. Some scenes were re-written as the plot took shape.

Now, there are at least two schools of thought that come to mind with regard to developing a plot. First, you can develop the entire plot before you start writing. Perhaps you like using note cards. Some writers will jot down certain scenes, events, or peaks along the plotline onto individual cards and then lay them out, re-order some of them, take out the cards that do not work, and insert new ones to take the story from beginning to end. Others will use an outline format to break their story into parts that build to a climax. Some may develop the entire plot in their mind and let the

story flow.

The second school of thought is to let the kernel of the story expand and grow as you write. In this way, you run with the idea as it hatches. You do not sort everything out before, but get right into the work. The upside of writing this way is that you write out the ideas when they are fresh and you have words on paper (or on a computer screen) almost immediately, which is rewarding. The downside of following the second school of thought is that you may have to cut and burn sections of your text that are made obsolete or unworkable as the story takes shape.

As you consider your plot, remember to keep it interesting and fresh. There are so many fantasy and science fiction books in print that it is challenging to come up with truly original plots, but that is the challenge. How do you know if you have an original idea? Read other writers' works. Let others who read significant numbers of books in the genre take a look at your story, or you can bounce ideas off them. I enjoy having friends who write and a wife who reads voraciously. Often, I bounce ideas off them to see if they think my great ideas are truly great.

Think logically. Thinking logically is a good idea for each element of your story, but especially for your plot. If your story has an elf prince traveling into a land controlled by an evil sorcerer, which is also overrun by hordes of monsters, your prince better have a very good reason for being there. If he is royalty, why wouldn't he send an army or a spy to do the work instead of risking himself. If he runs into a tavern maiden and you want her to join him in his adventure, make sure she has her own reasons for going and make sure there is a reason to have her come along. As your plot develops, ask yourself enough questions so that you are sure your plot will be believable and "ring true" to the reader.

Characters

Make them compelling, realistic, and flawed. I have had more than a few story ideas that centered around a character. The plot, setting, and other elements of the story came later, but the basic idea was for a certain character. Most stories are told and shown through the eyes of one or more characters. Even if your story is written in third person omniscient, the characters will make or break your story.

The first thing I suggested about writing your characters is to make them compelling. I do not mean to imply that you need to have superheroes or ultra-villains. You can if you want. What I mean to imply is that the characters should be interesting and believable. If the reader is going to spend hundreds of pages inside a protagonist's mind, that protagonist's mind better be worth spending time in. To make your characters compelling, give them personalities (each character gets her own personality). When your heroine speaks, she should have her own voice. Give your characters strengths and flaws.

What makes a character compelling is also what makes them realistic. Some people, including myself, enjoy fantasy and science fiction writing because it allows much of the story to come from the author's mind and often requires little research. However, I will offer one warning: do not allow yourself to be lazy with your characters. Do a little research if necessary. If your antagonist is a pirate, he probably ought to know a little about life on a boat and be able to use the appropriate terms for the parts of the ship he commands. In the novel I have been working on for some time, my main character is a carpenter, so I've spent time researching carpentry and woods. If you have an alchemist in your story, and your story is set in a medieval world, do enough research to know the terms for the glassware and methods used by alchemists in a comparable time.

One last note that applies to characters in novels, primarily, and in short stories to a lesser

extent: let your character grow, learn a life lesson, or change in a meaningful way. This is particularly true if your story covers a significant amount of time. Readers can identify with a flawed character, and can identify even more if the character discovers one of his flaws and makes a change for the better. If your story warrants 250-500 pages of attention, the events therein should be compelling enough that they would impact the lives of those characters experiencing them. One of the better series I have recently read for allowing character growth and discovery was Terry Brooks' Voyage of the Jerle Shanara. In that series, most of the main characters discovered something of a weakness about themselves, struggled through self doubt, overcame fear, and showed strength of character not only because they were facing incredible threats, but because they were also facing self-doubt and overcoming it all.

Setting

Research may also come in handy as you develop your setting. The time period elements of your story and the geography of your world are both areas where time in the library or online is well-spent. On occasion, I become so wrapped up in the action of a scene I have written that I forget to establish a setting. If you find yourself doing this, go back and work add the color to the scene; give it dimension. This is where description comes into play. In our November writing challenge, we solicited submissions that paid special attention to detail. Those details in your story paint the picture in a reader's mind wherein the action can occur. The more specific details, the better. For example, consider the following two excerpts:

1. The tracker found fresh prints on the ground and followed them into the dark woods.
2. Crouching near the trail, Devin saw crushed lichen and drag marks in the dank mud, indicating a handful of riders had rode hard into the forest early that day. The rotten smell of mold and decay filled his nostrils as a warm breeze rippled through the black leaves of the chartant trees ahead. Branches wove together like an old man's fingers high above, casting a dappled blanket of shadow over the trail ahead. Steadying himself with a gnarled walking staff, Devin strode into the darkness.

Now, there is a point where too much detail bogs the story down. I'll declare that I'm a huge Robert Jordan fan. He writes 1000 page books that could easily be cut by a third to a half if the descriptive detail were omitted. So, I tend to like plenty of detail. Others may prefer less. All will say, however, that your story must have enough detail to give the reader a clear mental picture of where the story takes place.

Another key in world-building and establishing settings on any level is to involve as many senses as possible. Write these sensory details into your story with subtlety and care. The more senses you involve, the clearer the picture becomes and the more dimension your setting has. In the example above, excerpt one involved only one sense; the reader could see what the man did. In excerpt two, much more visual detail is given, but the sense of touch is engaged when you read about some of the textures and about the warm breeze. Likewise, the senses of smell and hearing are also cued.

Consistency

This is not a standard story element, but one of my own personal interjections. Consistency comes into play with your plot and your settings, but most importantly with your characters. Few

things jump out at me more than when I am reading a novel where a character acts one way time and again, and then in the moment of truth, the character inexplicably departs from his normal behavior because that is the only way the plot succeeds.

Let me give an example.

Imagine the antagonist in your story is a supremely powerful evil sorcerer. We will call him Bruce. Now, Bruce has instantly flattened every foe he has faced, obliterated them with fire (blue druid fire if you're a Terry Brooks fan), lightning, or simply disintegrated them. Yet, when the mighty and terrifying Bruce faces our young, overmatched hero, Gerald, Bruce takes his time to taunt and "play with" Gerald. In the meantime, though beat up and hurting, Gerald finally figures out how to use the stupendous relic given to him by a pixie, nixie, or fairy of some sort to defeat Bruce. Or worse yet, Bruce decides to imprison Gerald, rather than to turn him into a pile of ash.

Make your plot, setting, and characters consistent and believable. Again, this helps your story "ring true" to a reader.

Pacing

This is really a subcategory of "Plot," but I think it warrants its own section because it is such a critical and often difficult issue to resolve for an author. This is also an area where a friend, or better yet, a writing workshop member, can be very valuable. You may have great characters, a beautiful world, and a plot that is going to blow the reader's socks off. But, if you lose the reader because the story drags, he will never get there. On the bright side, the reader keeps his socks, but your story will fail.

Perhaps you do not have any tendency toward being overly verbose (this generally does not apply to me), but you have the opposite problem. You are in such a hurry to get to your grand climax that you rush right to it and leave the reader without any build-up, no anticipation, and the power of the moment is lost.

Your story should unfold at a quick enough pace that the reader enjoys the peaks and valleys of the plot. It should build up to conflict, and it should hold the reader captive as your antagonists get their day in the sun. It should then deliver its climactic moment after

The reader has had a chance to prepare herself for it. Then, it should quickly wrap up all the loose ends and conclude.

As I mentioned, the best way to see if your pacing is right is to have others read your work. Perhaps you should solicit the opinion of someone other than your mother if she gushes about every word you write. She may just be happy that you're literate, but certainly an unbiased audience is more valuable here. The more opinions you get the better.

Climax

As you near the end of your story, it is generally a good idea to include a major event that brings the entire story together. I could be wrong about this. Perhaps the journey your characters take is so satisfying that the story could end without a special event and still keep your readers happy. If that is the case, I would love to borrow your forgiving readers. Most of us, expect some kind of resolution. Most of us read fantasy and science fiction for the adventure. What is a good adventure without a culminating event that puts death on the line, if not the salvation of humanity, or the universe?

It is in our nature to want a satisfying ending to a story. Better yet, we want one that packs a

punch. And, for many of us, we want the hero to win and the day to be saved… in the end. Now, there are many great tragedies in literature. There are many cliffhanger endings to first and middle books in fantasy/science fiction series. But, generally, a fantasy/science fiction reader will come away more satisfied if the story itself ends with a bang and the good guys win.

One final note about the climax: the power of the climax is built and delivered in the small details of your story leading up to the climax. If a reader does not identify with a character, the character's struggles and victories will fall flat. I believe that one reason J. K. Rowling is so successful, and people love her books so much, is because she pays attention to the details. Readers can identify with Harry, Ron, and Hermoine because Rowling does such a marvelous job making them real (and lovable). She spends just enough time making you dislike the "bad guys" in her stories by slipping in little details that paint your perception of them. If you want a truly climactic ending to your story, worry less about the event itself and more about the characters and how they reach the climax.

Parting Advice

I have already spent much more time than I anticipated writing this article. The other editors may ask me to trim a couple thousand words, but I thought I should add a couple of thoughts that have helped me in my hobby of writing fantasy fiction.

In and undergraduate writing class, a professor of mine advised that writing a story is like growing a tree. You start with a seed, nurture it and watch it grow. As it grows, you cut and prune certain parts to help it take shape. If a branch dies, you remove it and nurture the tree to fill in the void with healthy branches. As you grow your stories, trim out the parts that do not work, nurture the ones that do. Cultivate your writing.

And, finally…

Years ago, I used to spend quite a bit of time working out and exercising. This was back when I was single and had loads of free time. I bought every Muscle & Fitness and Flex magazine that came out and read them cover-to-cover. I hope I have not lost all credibility at this point. At first, I wanted to find the best work-out regimen that would allow me to look a certain way. I would see the photos of the bodybuilders and read the routines of those who looked like I wanted to look. I quickly realized that dozens of bodybuilders who looked quite similar had vastly different routines. They all had different exercises they liked, and they varied in the number of times per week and time per day that they would work out. The bottom line was, each had to find a routine that worked best for him. It's the same with writing.

Whether you use outlines, charts, note cards, or a chalkboard, what works best is for you to decide. How you write is up to you.

This gets me back to my original, simple premise. The only way I was going to look anything like the bodybuilders on the magazine pages was to work out consistently over time (and use steroids). The only way you are going to see a complete story and improve as a writer is to sit down and write. Sit down and write some more. After a while, you will find yourself writing those wonderful words, "The End."

The Writing Craft Series
Article 3: Notes On Revision, For Writers Who Think They're Finished

By M. Thomas

Let me guess. You have just finished the greatest work of undiscovered genius ever written. You have brainstormed and plotted until your poor fingers are bleeding. You are positive the big-wigs at (insert-high-paying-market-here) won't be able to help themselves when they read your work. They will squirm with delight. They will dance in the aisles and proclaim to their colleagues, "Here is the literary gem that I have been looking for all my life!"

Until they get to page ten, where you have an army of five thousand crossing a mountain range toward hostile territory in less than three weeks. In the snow. With no bathroom breaks.

Revision is that last little bit where you find all the mistakes that make you wonder why you ever considered writing in the first place, when all you've done is blunder around for fifteen to four-hundred pages. Don't despair. A good revision can re-affirm your devotion to the craft and boost your ego when you realize how much better the story is now. And, after a while, it gets easier. Scout's honor.

A good revision can re-affirm your devotion to the craft and boost your ego when you realize how much better the story is now.

The process of revision involves the examination of continuity. People actually get paid for this sort of thing in the movie industry. These are the people who didn't happen to notice that when Indiana Jones faced a hissing cobra in the snake pit, the cobra was reflected in the glass between it and the hero.

You, however, do not have the budget for a staff, which means you're on your own. So here are some things to remember.

Clothing

Much as I like a good coronation, events like these in stories are a good place to start with a warning about fabrics and colors. Whatever color the king wears is not likely to be worn by the attendees. Certain dyes, such as red, blue, and purple, were much more expensive than others. Also, it was bad form to try and show up the new king--he having conquered the evil usurper and all.

Consider the time of year. Is your coronation taking place in the winter? Much as fantasy loves to see a low-cut décolletage, those castles were made of stone and cold. Got a bunch of ladies running around in satin and sandals? We'll just hold a mass funeral for them later, shall we, since they probably all died of exposure. For a cold coronation, think fur.

Warm-weather events seem much easier. Let's do the party in silk. Silk, however, comes from worms. Imagine how long it takes one good worm to produce a single thread. Is your kitchen-wench going to suddenly have access to a silk sash? Not unless she's got a fairy-godmother. Are any of your attendees going to have access to silk? Not unless they have a fairy silk-worm farm, or lots of money to import it. This example is being used to illustrate the need for accuracy. If your cultural heroes have yet to discover or conquer a silk-trading nation, then you are out of luck. As far as fabrics go, you should consider what resources your people have immediately available to them for

clothing, or what they would be able to afford.

Also, remember what weather and bleeding does to cloth. Without our current technology, most fabrics wet with water or blood in substantial amounts may become nearly impossible to navigate. Heavy while wet, stiff while dry. Polyester and Lycra were great inventions, but they were recent inventions. Remember, not all your medieval characters are going to have access to soft, supple fabrics.

Travel

David Eddings addresses this admirably in *Enchanters' End Game*. Here's an eye-opening quote regarding the movement of several armies:

"Fulrach," King Rhodar of Drasnia objected when the king of the Sendars called for yet another rest period, "if we don't move any faster than this, it will take us all summer to get to the eastern escarpment."

"You're exaggerating, Rhodar," King Fulrach replied mildly. "We're making pretty good time. The supply wagons are heavy, and the wagon horses have to be rested every hour."

Did you see the travel clue? If not, try this one from "Pawn of Prophecy," discussing the travel of a group of people in three wagons:

"Have you any idea how long it takes to travel by wagon?" Aunt Pol asked.
"Six to ten leagues a day," he told her.

The man knew what he was talking about. Horses, when attached to things they must pull, are slow. Armies almost always need horses attached to wagons full of food (unless they are magic armies). Wagon horses dragging supplies for an army need to rest every hour. Despite what you may have heard, horses cannot gallop for indeterminable periods of time without rest, especially while pulling wagons. For that matter, neither can camels or elephants, in case you wanted to slide around the issue by using a different animal.

If travel figures heavily into your story, you need to know what travel entails. We really have very little idea of the complex and tedious nature of medieval travel these days. No convenient gas-stations every mile means no snacks, or water, or fuel. What's a league? What's a nautical mile? How long does a ship take to travel a nautical mile, considering a) number of sails or rowers, and b) wind strength? Similarly, for sci-fi, how might space drag on a space-craft? Oh, we all marvel at the idea of traveling "faster than light," but does such travel make a craft immune to debris? What happens to a ship's trajectory if it encounters celestial road-kill while traveling through a slip-stream? Though some of this may be up to the speculation of an author, I know I lost a muffler once when I hit an unfortunate (and already dead) raccoon on a country road late at night.

Travel is complicated. If it figures heavily in your story, it deserves some consideration. Remember the last time you took a road trip to the Grand Canyon with the kids in the back seat (you may have been one of the kids)? Remember all the whining, the "are we there yet's," the bathroom stops at dubiously clean gas stations, the arguing over the radio station? If you think that's bad, how will your entire army react to being days on the road without a headset and a hand-held computer game?

Time

This is often one of the most overlooked details. For instance, you may open your scene at dawn, because it seems a good place to start. A few lines later you've forgotten, and have your hero battling night-minions. Really? When did the sun go down? And what happened in between? Time and travel go together well, as illustrated above. You may want to get your crusaders to the battle-grounds in a hurry, but your army is going to be constrained by its inability to travel at more than a walk. Days will pass. Beards will grow. Horses' hooves pick up stones. There will be weather to contend with, which may slow things down. Wagon wheels break, stalling the onward march.

Also, if you've got a culture that doesn't have clocks, you probably shouldn't have your Generals estimating arrival time in minutes and hours, since they will have no frame of reference for small increments of time. Keep estimations of time to the more vague distribution of a day: morning, mid-morning, noon, afternoon, mid-afternoon, early evening, sunset, etc. Sci-fi writers can be more specific, but your time elements also need to be familiar to a reader somehow. If you're using "miniclicks" as a unit of time, how should a reader see this? Is it a relative of the minute, the second, the hour, the daily rotation of a planet? Similarly, sci-fi writers should keep in mind the theoretical aspects of space travel. If you have a ship that travels faster than light, zipping around the galaxy, how much time will have passed when they return to the stationary base on planet Zephoid? Will styles have changed? What about emerging technology? How does it affect a traveler to come home and find out all the Synth-A-Delis have been replaced by Time-Conduit-Cafes?

There's nothing wrong with time that a good chart can't help. Draw a circle on a piece of paper, and fill in the hour marks. Between each mark, write a brief note to yourself, something like, "9 a.m.--battle with ogre. 2 p.m.--lunch with damsel in distress." For longer periods of time, fill your clock face in with months. Your notes should be a little more descriptive here. "September—slog through autumn rains to Lonely Mountains. November—mired down in caves in mountains due to snowstorm. Soldiers cranky."

Other Miscellaneous Items

Beware of changing hair and eye color. If you started off with your heroine as a brunette, then decided she ought to be a blond, make sure you go back with a fine-tooth comb and find all mention of "her dark tresses" and change them to "her shimmering locks." Beware of clichés like dark tresses and shimmering locks. Other clichés include grizzled wizards in white or blue robes. Buxom tavern wenches. Young, impertinent swordspeople who are taught the lessons of life while being knocked on their bottoms by a war-hardened tutor. Stories full of thin people. Stories full of muscled people. Impervious space-suits. Ray guns of any sort.

Keep in mind that swords rust, bowstrings snap, shoelaces come undone, and technology collects dust. Batteries wear down, power crystals sometimes run out of energy, and space suits have to have a zipper somewhere. In other words, keep it real.

Another thing to keep in mind is language. Seeing the word "okay" in any medieval fantasy story makes me grind my teeth. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word evolved in the mid 19th century, in America, and became part of Van Buren's political slogan. So what is it doing in pre-industrial Valesburg being spoken by elves? Watch out for anachronisms like that.

Along with language, be careful about consistency in religions. One of the most difficult tasks fantasy writers face is writing about religion without making it sound too much like one we already have, or has already been used in another fantasy novel. It needs to be familiar, yet

different. If religion comes to play a large part in your story, you may need to do some research on the major types in order to decide which one will work for you. Types of religions have gone a long way to forming cultural paradigms. This may be watering things down a bit, but consider religious traditions that typically had strong feminine deities. Many of these developed matriarchal societies, or matriarchal family units. Other religions, where a single male deity took precedence, developed into patriarchal societies where the head of the household is considered to be the oldest male. The whole point here is to consider who is in power in your society, and what gives them that power. Be careful not to leave your reader dangling in theological limbo either. If you capitalize the word God once, you need to capitalize it each time so the reader knows it is a name of importance within the society. If you have a character who goes around muttering "Bezel's bells," as a curse, it would be helpful for your reader to know a little about Bezel and where the bells came from.

How To Go About It

That's all well and good you say, but where do I start? My best suggestion is to provide yourself with some tools before you begin. The simplest answer to maintaining the continuity of a character's appearance? Find a picture of someone you think your character might look like. Whenever you describe the character, look at the picture. That will keep you from changing hair color suddenly. Draw diagrams of just how your technology works, so you won't suddenly have your transponderator catch on the widgin, when the widgin isn't anywhere near the transponderator. Start with diagrams, pictures, maps, and calendars and you won't have to go back and juggle them all. For organic writers, who feel the story pushing at their brain and can't hold back long enough to be bothered with the construction of tools, add this part in later.

Next, read it out loud. I know, it seems tedious. But reading out loud forces your eyes to see what your brain has written. Strangely enough, sometimes our brains wander a bit, even while writing. You may find that somewhere near page four you have your character eating a sandwich, because you were hungry at that moment. It seemed a good idea at the time, but if your character left her pack in the cave while fleeing the trolls, where did the sandwich come from?

Ultimately, the best way to ensure continuity is to know your story. After a while, you may come to know it too well. Then it's time to put it in the drawer for a while, and come back at it with fresh eyes after a week or more. I didn't notice the reflection of the cobra the first time I saw Indiana Jones. However, when I watched it again, I saw it because I already knew the story and was looking at the details.

The Dreaded Re-write

Occasionally, after all is said and done, an author will find themselves faced with fifteen to four-hundred pages of a work that, despite all the maps, calendars, and other revision tools, doesn't work. You may have had this problem, or, if you're like me, are lucky you haven't. But even though I haven't dealt with it yet, I have a very strong suspicion it's about to happen with my latest work in progress. Somehow, things just aren't clicking. 'Round about page 250, I've got fifty pages of dreck I wade through to get to the end, which is already written. I'm treading water as fast as I can, but things aren't working out. I've got this queasy feeling about it. Does my timeline flow? Yes. Are my characters consistent? Yes. So what is it?

It's my authorial instinct that something isn't right. And it means there will be a re-write in the future. Luckily, I'm not alone. Author Jeff Wheeler had this to say about his novel Landmoor, and his seven re-writes of the work:

Article: Notes on Revision

M. Thomas

Yuck, you're making me re-live a bad memory. After I had finished the sixth draft of Landmoor, I decided to change it. There was a character in the draft that didn't need to be there. His entrance in book two would have been much more powerful and I figured that out too late. It caused me a lot of heartsickness because it meant re-writing the novel yet again because this character was in so many scenes. I was so frustrated by the thought that I shelved the project for nearly a year. But then I decided it would be better than way. I had also come up with some other subtle changes that would make the story run more smoothly. So in the end, I re-wrote it from scratch. Literally. And I am much happier with how it turned out. You learn so much writing a novel draft. Sometimes you have to be brave enough to throw away a previous attempt in order to make it even better.

Here's the point. Trust your instincts. If your brain is telling you something isn't working, but you can't put your finger on it yet, put the manuscript away. It's one of the hardest things for a writer to do. (I call it the "You can have my manuscript when you pry it out of my cold, dead fingers" syndrome.) But again, the Indiana Jones analogy comes into play. When we writers are faced with the big-budget-action-excitement of our own enthusiasm for our work, it is easy to miss the little reflections of snakes. The most important and most difficult part of the revision process is letting go of the manuscript.

Put it away.

Work on something else, or give yourself a break. Consider the overall scope of the piece without looking at the words. Remember, a week or more. In Stephen King's *On Writing*, he suggests months. Go back with a clear mind, and just read. Restrain the impulse to edit and nit-pick. If you don't find it the first time, put it away again and repeat the process. Sooner or later, the problem is going to stick out. Now you can re-write. But, as Jeff mentions, the first time may not always be the charm. You may have to do this several times. Eventually, it will work. And as you sit and regard the masterpiece that is your detail-accurate, anachronism-free manuscript, it will all have been worth it.

Once you've done all that, you're finished, right? Insert dry laugh here. Yes, you're finished creating. Now all you have to worry about is where to put all the commas. So, without further ado, I introduce you to our resident grammatical expert, whose article will gladly tell you just where to put 'em. Take it away Jeremy!

The Writing Craft Series
Article 4: Editing
By Jeremy Whitted

If you're reading this article, then you should have just finished several articles about creating your story. Having read them myself, I know that the information in them is valuable. By this stage, you should have a complete story sitting in front of you, characters developed, plot polished, and details revised. Now the fun starts. You can't forget the most important step: copyediting. This step is often glossed over, and trust me when I say that a poorly edited story has little chance of being published. Most authors feel their stories are properly edited, but they're wrong. Why? They mistakenly trust their own editing skills. Huge mistake.

No one, and I mean no one, should edit their own work. That is the Cardinal Sin, so to speak, of editing. It doesn't matter how good you are, or how good you think you are, you should not handle it on your own. Authors are too tied to their own stories to be able to look at them objectively. I can all but guarantee that if you sent me a story you wrote and, in your opinion, thoroughly edited yourself, I could find three mistakes per page. That's just the way it happens.

So who should edit your story? Good question. If you know a copyeditor, there is a good first choice. If not, just find someone you trust who has a decent command of English grammar. Ideally, you should have a few people read through it. But never, ever trust your own editing. Am I repeating myself enough for you? We receive numerous submissions that look like they haven't been read since the first writing. Admittedly, I often find I don't want to re-read a story I've written after writing it. But it's an essential step and possibly the difference between a published story and a "two-point shot" into the recycle bin (which is all the more tricky when the submission is electronic and not hardcopy).

Now I'm going to rant about some specific grammar mistakes. Time for a lesson of sorts, because even editors have a tough time with rules of English grammar. You'll have to excuse my layman's terms in these explanations. I probably won't use the proper technical terms. My goal is to explain things as simply as possible.

Down Doobie Do Down Down, Comma Comma

The biggest problem I see in all the stories I read and edit is improper comma usage. More specifically, I see errors in using commas to separate two or more clauses.

So what's a clause? Simply put, it's a group of words containing a subject and a verb (as opposed to a phrase, which does not contain a subject-verb grouping). In this discussion, I'll be primarily using independent clauses. What is an independent clause? It is, basically, a complete sentence.

The Troll ate the Elf.

Now to the problem at hand. How do you combine two complete sentences? With a coordinating conjunction, such as *and*, *but*, *or*, *so*, etc.

The Troll ate the Elf, and he wrinkled his nose in distaste.

Notice the comma there? We have two complete, independent sentences:

The Troll ate the Elf
and
He wrinkled his nose in distaste.

When you combine two complete sentences with a conjunction, in this case *and*, you **always** put a comma before the conjunction. A surprising number of people put the comma after the conjunction, and many people just leave it out. Stop it!! Now, the exception. In practical usage, there is always an exception. When one of the sentences in this new compound sentence is rather short, the comma can be omitted.

The Troll ate the Elf for breakfast and he was full.

Perfectly acceptable. So how short does a sentence need to be? There are no hard rules on it. When in doubt, put in a comma. It is never wrong.

Now, along these lines, what about a dependant, or subordinate, clause? How are those connected? This, by the way, is where I see the largest number of errors. A dependant clause, as an example, has no subject, but rather relies on a previous clause to supply it.

The Troll ate the Elf and wrinkled his nose in distaste.

Actually, this is probably more of a compound predicate than a dependent clause, but I won't bother you with those details. The point here is still valid. The first part of the sentence is the same as before, a complete sentence followed by the conjunction *and*. However, the second part, *wrinkled his nose in distaste*, is not a complete sentence. The subject is implied, relying on the first part of the sentence. In these instances, never EVER put a comma in front of (or behind) the conjunction. There is no need. I can't even think of a usage exception in this case. Well ok, I can. But don't let that take away from my insistence. An exception would be strictly for style, like if the second part of the sentence really needed to be emphasized, or if it had a looser connection with the first part. (Example: The Troll ate the Elf, and proceeded to get sick all over the clean carpet. The comma isn't needed, but it does provide some emphasis. However, I have found that making them into two separate sentences can be more effective if emphasis is the desired effect.) If you're not sure about a particular sentence, take out the conjunction and read the two parts of the sentence separately. If they both stand on their own, use a comma. If not, then one is dependent, and a comma is not needed.

Just a side note: A comma can be used when a conjunction is omitted, with some slight rewording.

The Troll ate the Elf, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

A second side note: For you grammar geeks out there, yes, this is very oversimplified and narrowly scoped. But I think the point is made. At least I hope it is.

One final note on comma usage: I can think of only one time when a comma would come immediately following a conjunction.

The Troll ate the Elf and, trying not to be sick, plopped down on the ground.

Note what the commas surround: *trying not to be sick*. Without it, the sentence would read as follows:

The Troll ate the Elf and plopped down on the ground.

The phrase *trying not to be sick* is nonrestrictive (not important to the meaning), so it is set apart with commas. It just so happens that it comes right after the conjunction. This is fine.

But watch what happens when I mess with this sentence by turning it into a compound (two independent clauses):

The Troll ate the Elf, and trying not to be sick, he plopped down on the ground.

Did I successfully mess with your head on that one? Now we have two complete sentences being joined. Without the phrase *trying not to be sick*, see how it looks:

The Troll ate the Elf, and he plopped down on the ground.

The comma comes before the conjunction, as we discussed earlier. Now, however, the phrase *trying not to be sick* is an introductory phrase for the second sentence:

Trying not to be sick, he plopped down on the ground.

So what is the rule being used here? If the second half of a compound sentence (a compound sentence is two independent clauses separated by a conjunction) has an introductory phrase, no comma is needed between the conjunction and the phrase. Otherwise, the sentence would look like this:

The Troll ate the Elf, and, trying not to be sick, he plopped down on the ground.

Technically it's correct, but it's comma overkill.

You'd better watch it. Your participle is dangling! (Or misplaced)

We've all heard about dangling participles, but do you actually know what one is? It's time to reveal a secret about a close friend. Jeff Wheeler, author of *Landmoor* and *The Wishing Lantern*, loves to open sentences with a participial, or introductory, phrase. It's his style. However, it took me years, literally, to break him of his dangling participle habit. He just refused to get it! Maybe I just didn't explain myself well. Anyway, he is broken of his habit, and you can be, too!

First, the participial phrase used correctly:

Sailing across the pale sky, the Dragon soared high, looking for his prey.

I know, terrible writing. But grammatically correct! *Sailing across the pale sky* is what we call a

participial phrase. Now, let's rewrite this sentence and make that participle dangle!

Sailing across the pale sky, a sudden breeze knocked the Dragon momentarily off-balance.

If you're thinking that sentence sounds fine, then you have a bad habit to break (and a weak Dragon, if a breeze will knock it off-balance)! Let's break it down.

What is the subject of the second sentence? The subject is now *a sudden breeze*. To what, then, does the participial phrase refer? The breeze? In this case, no. It's referring to the Dragon. It's the Dragon that's sailing, not the breeze.

However, the Dragon is not the subject. This participle, my friends, is dangling. Actually, to be more precise, it's misplaced. The difference between a dangling participle and a misplaced participle is minimal, and they're both bad. Technically, a dangling participle would have no firm subject to grasp.

When looking at the results of the failed spell, the problem was obvious.

This participle dangles because it has no subject. *The problem* isn't the subject; the subject should be "*we*" or "*I*" or something similar. But it's not there. It's dangling out there, hoping against hope to find a subject. If that doesn't explain the difference between a dangling and a misplaced participle, then hopefully you can at least recognize them and know they are both bad. To sum up, a participial, or introductory, phrase should always refer to the subject of the sentence.

Everybody's going on….and on….and on….and on….

Ah, the mighty run-on sentence: it just keeps going, and going, and going, and… you get the picture, though I'd rather not bother you with an example because that would be very tedious and annoying, and far be it from me, the author trying to get you to read this article, to bog you down with useless, pointless run-on sentences that, quite frankly, are self-explanatory; and besides, we all know how to recognize a run-on and how to eliminate them from our writing, right? You may doubt me, but sentences like the one I just created are all over the submissions I read. Here's a good rule of thumb: if you can't read your sentence out loud in one normal breath, then it's probably a little too long. Find a few good spots to throw in a period and capitalize the next word. You'll be doing yourself, and your readers, a great service.

Speaking of speaking…

I don't know where to start with punctuating dialogue. What's more, I don't know where to end. So I'm just going to give you a few basics and hope they make sense.

"Can you think of any reason," asked the King, "why I shouldn't throw you in the dungeon?"

Yeah, yeah, horrible writing. But it's an example of how to punctuate a sentence split in the middle. Commas, periods, question marks, etc. all fall inside the quotes. An interjection, like *asked the King*, should also be set apart with commas, before and after. Just note that the comma before *asked* also happens to fall inside the quote.

Another thing to mention with the sentence above: The second part of the quote should not be

capitalized unless it starts a new sentence.

"I'm at a loss, my Queen," stated the King. "Perhaps I'll just throw you in the dungeon."

And how about punctuating questions?

The King turned to his wife and asked, "How could you do this to me?"

Notice the question mark is inside the quotes. This is almost always the case. And in fiction, you will rarely see an exception to this rule. But to be thorough, here you go:

Did the King turn to his wife and say, "Get out of here"?

It's an awkward sentence, and one that probably wouldn't come up in fiction writing, but if the overall sentence is a question, but not the part in quotes, then the question mark would fall outside of the quotes. Another point in the last couple examples. If the dialogue is the second part of the sentence, you would capitalize the first word in the quotes, just as if it started a sentence.

Finally, if the dialogue tag (the part that describes the dialogue) mentions movement, the dialogue must end with ending punctuation. The tag then becomes a new sentence. For instance:

"I'll throw you in the dungeon." The King nodded.
and
"I'll throw you in the dungeon!" The King slammed his fist down on the table.

If the dialogue tag tells *how* the dialogue was spoken, it can end with a comma, and the dialogue tag does not have to be a new sentence.

"I should throw you in the dungeon," the King muttered.
and
"I should throw you in the dungeon!" the King bellowed.

Although descriptive dialogue tags aren't usually recommended (current theory says keep it simple, just use he said, she said) these are good examples of how to punctuate your dialogue.

An important note: the preceding rules apply to American English, for the most part. British English has different rules, particularly regarding punctuation inside of quotation marks versus outside. Keep that in mind if you are reading this across the pond.

And in conclusion…

OK, I've tortured you long enough. And believe me, I could go on. For now, I'll leave you with those short lessons. And remember, please, do not act as your own editor! Never, never, NEVER! Now start writing.

The Writing Craft Series
Article 5: Notes About Submitting, For Writers
By M. Thomas

Our publication pays five cents per word.

Dang. I should have made the story longer. Maybe I can add in some description? Put in something about "the turgid depths of his mercurial eyes, which were so like the pond she used to play in as a child when she went romping off through the grass with her friends…"

Our publication is non-paying.

Hmmm. I'll send them the stream-of-consciousness recitation of last night's weird dream. What do they care if I don't have any punctuation? They should be glad to have me.

Ah ha ha. Do you hear the dry laugh? We've come to submitting. This is the part that will make or break you. Let me tell you a little story.

Eighteen years ago a twelve year-old girl wrote a two-hundred page fantasy novel. She didn't write it because she loved fantasy. She wrote it because loved the *idea* of fantasy, and couldn't find anything on the shelves that appealed to her. A parental divorce was looming. Her Cinderella life was about to become cinders. She knew this, and created her own world.

She escaped, or tried to. She created a stable family unit within the story that was made up of un-related people. *They* would never split up. They couldn't. They were on a quest. They needed one another.

She mentioned in her query letter (badly typed, self-confessional and slightly pleading prose) that she was twelve.

Because of that, she got back several very nice, carefully worded responses.

It doesn't have anything to do with your writing. It's just that we're full of submissions. Best of luck, and keep trying!

She kept trying.

Around age twenty she had a collection of rejections in a file. She got a rejection from a famous author who will remain unnamed (the name has an M and a Z and a B in it, and the author was renowned for her harsh criticism of new writers), that nearly crushed her. This author suggested, in personalized red ink, that her work was worthy of a Bulwer-Lytton award. If you don't know what that is, go look it up. I'm too embarrassed, still, to explain it.

She stopped writing for a year. Then she got smarter.

What was she writing for?

To re-hash old hurts? To tell more stories about things that other people already knew about?

No!

To put those things into her characters as "fleshing out." Not to make melodrama of her life, in words.

She kept writing. Nine years later, she shelled out some cash to join an on-line workshop. (By the way, by this time she had realistically pursued a career and achieved something that could pay the bills.)

She posted a little ditty on the workshop. Something funny, something she didn't have her heart set on. Just to see what would happen.

She got a response.

I like this. Want to submit something to my new e-zine, Deep Magic?

Did she ever! What did she have to lose? Who cared if they didn't pay? She'd never been paid before. The thing was, *they* wanted something *she* had written.

She pulled up an old story that had been languishing unfinished for about three years, finished it, and sent it in.

Not only did they publish it, they asked her to be an editor.

Cinderella put on her glass slippers, and went to the ball.

The point of the story? Persistence and a thick skin. Writers are notoriously guilty of perpetuating the relentless pabulum that "your work is your baby." When you've gotten this far, the submitting stage, it's time to remember the sparrows, who almost literally kick their kids out of the nest to see if they can fly.

At this point, creative genius means nothing. Your "dream, vision, soul, and spirit," are just old hippy catch-words that don't impress anyone.

If you intend to submit, you have entered a business. Go about it in a business-like way, or you'll not survive.

The Story

The story itself, the manuscript, should be as clean as possible. By now you've read all the articles on the evolutionary cycles of a story or novel. By the time you get to submitting, the house should be in order. You need to know, and to have demonstrated your knowledge of, the difference between those tricky words like to, too, and two. Quite, quiet, quit. Get thee a manual, author. Know how to punctuate dialogue. In short, make as few possible errors as are humanly possible. There seems to be this undying idea that it's an editor's job to edit. No. The editor's job is to proofread. Your job is to edit.

Paper manuscripts need to be on nice paper. No coffee stains. Use a good printer cartridge. Set your margins accordingly. Current thinking on margins varies from 1 inch to 1 1/4 inches. Unless otherwise specified in the publisher's guidelines, use one of these. Put your last name in the header and, for goodness' sake, number your pages. It's hard to give concrete rules on this, because editorial preferences vary. But again, unless otherwise specified, you can't go wrong with putting this in the upper right-hand corner. Which way do we turn pages? From right to left. Therefore, you want the editor or publisher to be able to see your info right there, whenever they turn a page.

Unless otherwise specified, use a Courier font. It's big, bold, and easy to read for editors who spend their days reading. Don't make it difficult for them. And double-space those manuscripts! Never, EVER send a single-spaced manuscript to a publisher or editor. It will get you booted even if the manuscript is written on gold and you've left a polite note saying they can keep it, if they like.

For e-zines the submissions are often a little less stressful. But continue to be aware of submission guidelines. Some e-zines will *request* a specific font. Do try to fulfill that request. If it is difficult to do so, don't complain about it to them in your cover letter. Some will require a specific

font because it makes it easier for them to publish the manuscript. Those that *require* Courier will be less tolerant of your fancy Edwardian Script font than those who *request* Palatino and get Courier instead.

Publishing is a tough game. But do remember, WE ARE NOT AT WAR WITH EDITORS! For the most part, they aren't sharp-nosed discouragers who look for the tiniest error as an excuse to reject you. Honest. But these people make their money reading more stuff in one day than you do on a holiday weekend. There's nothing wrong with making sure all the stupid mistakes are out of the way, so that they can lay their eyes upon your magnificence and proclaim it to the world.

Cover Letters

Remember, it's a business. Don't be cute. Don't try to be endearing. Don't, oh please don't, beg an editor to like you.

"I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it."

"Dude. Your readers are gonna LOVE this, man!"

"I'm a single mother of seven, and little Timmy needs a toenail transplant because of the fungus, and anything you could do to help, such as publishing my story, would be wonderful."

The point being, don't put any personal commentary in your query letter, even to an e-zine. I'm sure, if we met in real life, we'd be the best of friends. But no editor wants to know this from your letter. They have their own friends. Leave it straight-forward for short-story submissions:

Dear Editor:

Please consider my submission "The Best Story Ever" for your magazine. It is complete at 8,000 words. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Hopeful Author

Leave the personal relationship for after your work has been accepted.

Novel submissions are a little different, and if I could write it all down here in one article, I would. Unfortunately, opinions vary so widely about novel query letters that, well, yes, I hate to say it, you're going to have to do some research to find what works for you. There's a technique to novel query letters that requires almost as much finesse as writing the entire novel, and plenty of advice abounds. I can, however, offer you a few basics.

1. Don't send a query letter with coffee stains on it.
2. Don't beg the editor to like you.
3. Don't make claims about the book that have nothing to do with whether or not it will be a successful money-maker for the publisher:

"My mom loves this book, and she never likes anything I write, so it's probably pretty good."

4. Don't assault the publisher with clever promotional tactics:

"QUEST FOR A MAGICAL OBJECT! T-SHIRTS AVAILABLE! THE BEST THING SINCE TOLKIEN! GET IN ON IT NOW!"

5. Don't begin your query letter with any question that can be answered by "not really:"

"Would you like to read the amazing new novel by undiscovered talent Ima Namateur?" (Not really.)

6. Don't begin your query letter with a question of any sort that can be answered in the negative:

"What would it be like to live in a world where magic is truly amazing?" (Pretty much like every fantasy novel ever written, I expect.)

You get the idea. Publisher's preferences will vary, but usually they want to see a query letter, 1-2 page synopsis, and the first three chapters. But always check the publisher's guidelines before sending anything! Some may want the whole thing right off the bat. Some may just want a query letter. It's your job to make sure you aren't sending them something they don't want.

Final Thoughts

It's a tough business. I feel for you writers who, like me, pound away at keyboards at odd hours, interpreting the strange script of ideas that came to you in the middle of the night and were jotted down on big yellow pads in sleepy Sanskrit. I feel for you, who have The Next Amazing Story To Tell, and have brainstormed and edited and finalized until your fingers are raw. You may be the next Asimov, the next Mieville, the next Gaimon, Pratchett, Eddings, Jordan, LeGuin, Cherryh, Butler, Lewis, or Tolkien.

You may be. But not until you're published. And once the dreaming is done, reality comes in with a big boot, aimed at your backside.

Some of us will do it. Some of us won't. But those of us who ignore the business side of things will have a harder row to hoe than those who understand this is a professional endeavor.

My advice? Submit. Have some disdain for non-paying mags or e-zines? Ask yourself, are you being paid for it now? If the answer is yes, on a *consistent* basis, then you have some leeway to be selective of your markets. If not, well, mags like Deep Magic have more than 1,000 readers. Do you know 1,000 people who know your name?

I do. They are the fine readers of this publication. Before this, it was pretty much just my mother, my father, and a few friends.

So clean it up, thicken your skin, and send it in. Don't take rejections personally, and never let them stop you from submitting to said magazine, publisher, or agent again. You never know what's going to hit. If you've done all you can--researched and written the best work possible, continued to work on things even during the lag times of waiting for responses, and gone on with the mindset that not everything is publication worthy but every rejection is just a challenge to write better--then you are already a professional.

Somewhere there's a Prince, I promise. Put on your shoes, Cinderella, and dance.

The Writing Craft Series
Article 6: Legal Issues to Consider When Submitting Your Masterpiece to the Wolves of the Publishing World
By Brendon Taylor

I know, I know. You've already read five full articles on the writing process and have digested a mountain of do's and don'ts. You may have even read the two articles I previously wrote on the legal issues of copyright and trademark law. (The shameless self-promotion portion of this article is now concluded.) But, some of you may be interested in one more round of legal pomposity, er, information. You might be wondering what legal rights you have and what rights you give away when you submit your writing to traditional, online, and other publishers?

My first advice (not legal advice for those of you residing outside of the state of Idaho, but practical advice to all) is to contact your favorite local attorney or agent (they may be one and the same person/firm). You should raise, and ask until satisfactorily answered, any specific questions that tickle in the back of your mind. Let me, however, use a broad brush to sketch out some things you might want to consider.

Read the Submission Guidelines and all Contracts for Publication.

Really, this is the most important thing you can do to ensure your work is given its best chance at publication (as M. Thomas artfully explained in Article 5), and it is the most important thing you can do to learn what rights you are relinquishing by submitting to a publisher. The field of law at play here is not some mystical, obscure practice area that only relates to literary agents, publishers, and starving authors. We are talking about contract law.

Publishers make an offer when they post submission guidelines or offer you a contract. Authors accept those offers when they submit their work (in the case of submission guidelines) or sign their names on written contracts. I will use Deep Magic as my example here since I hastily scratched out our submission guidelines. If you read to the bottom of our guidelines, you'll discover that Deep Magic offers to read and accept or reject your submission in a timely manner and publish it if accepted. If you submit to Deep Magic, you agree to follow the requested format in submitting and grant exclusive electronic publication rights to Deep Magic for three months. This is pretty basic, and most publishers require more.

What if I want to submit my work to TOR the day after I submit to Deep Magic? Go ahead. Deep Magic only receives a three-month exclusive right to publish the submission *electronically*. Traditional publishing houses are fair game.

What if my story was published in Deep Magic in August? Again, the three-month period of exclusive rights have passed; submit to as many other publishers as you like.

What about other publishers?

That gets more complicated. To answer this question, I will explore a few sub-issues, such as copyright, work made for hire, and simultaneous submissions. But, remember, we are essentially talking about all of these items in the context of contract law.

Copyright

Keep in mind that upon typing the words "the end" to finish your work, or however you decide to finish it, you own the copyright on that work. This is true unless you've consciously or unconsciously copied significant portions of someone else's work. To learn what the United States Government has to say about copyright issues, and to receive answers to far more questions than I raise and answer in this article, visit the official U.S. Copyright Office website at http://www.loc.gov/copyright.

In order to protect your copyright in you work, simply include:

© 2002 Brendon Taylor. All Rights Reserved.

Okay, maybe you should use your own name, but if you want to give me your copyright, copy this as is. And thank you.

What about registration of copyrights? It is not a bad idea to pay the $30 fee and register your work with the Library of Congress, but it is not essential. Again, refer to the information on the U.S. Copyright Office's website for current information on protecting your copyright.

Generally, if you insert your copyright notice within your work, you will own the copyright, but exceptions to every rule exist, so let's explore a couple. If you are a staff author for a publication, your publication will own the copyright to the work you write for it. Exception to an exception: if you are a staff author who writes articles for a publication and stories are outside of your employment or contractual obligations, then you may submit your story to the publication and reserve your copyright interest in the story by using the proper notice.

Work Made for Hire

Another time that you may not own your copyright is when your work qualifies as "work made for hire." In order for a work to qualify as a work made for hire, the author need not be an employee of the publication. However, if the publication was the source of the idea for the material, the contract may identify the work as a "work made for hire." As part and parcel of you not owning the copyright on such a work, you would also not own the work itself. That is a little redundant, but worth stating two ways to make certain the point is clear.

Simultaneous Submissions, First Publication Rights, Etc.

I would like to spend a few words on some terms of art and a few other issues you might encounter in submitting your work for publication. Many, if not most, publishers post notice in their submission guidelines that they do not accept simultaneous submissions. That means what it appears to mean. Publishers do not want you to submit your story to other publishers while they are considering your work.

But, if I only submit to one at a time, it'll take years for all the rejection letters to roll in!

That's true, but that is the offer that the publisher is making, so you can accept it, reject it, or dishonor it. And, stop being so negative. Many people do not adhere to this requirement. I would never advise someone to violate any of the submission guidelines, but whether you follow them is up to you. Maybe you will get four rejections within six months instead of four rejections within two

years. On the other hand, maybe you will get an acceptance from your fourth choice of publishers three months after submitting and then get an acceptance from your second choice of publishers two months later. If that happens, what do you think your chances are of getting your second favorite publisher to publish the submitted work (none if you have already signed a contract with the other publisher) or any of your future work? Well, perhaps you could put the fourth choice off until you have gotten responses from the other publishers. Not a good idea. Really, those publishers will catch on to you and your name may find its way onto the wrong kind of a list.

Another term you might encounter is "first publication" or original publication rights. What these or other similar terms are describing is the position that publishers take with work that has been published before. Some publishers, such as Deep Magic, are happy to consider for publication stories that have been published elsewhere before. Other publishers, including many of the professional paying markets, want to be the first place your story is seen in print. If the publisher does not say it will not consider previously published work, you can assume that it will.

But my story, "Bob the Magic Dog," was published on my own personal website… does that count?

No.

What if it was published in a free e-zine my cousin Larry circulates among his seventeen closest friends?

It still probably does not "count."

What about if it makes it to Deep Magic, or another free e-zine with a fair sized (more than 1000 readers per month) circulation?

You are in serious gray area. Check with the publisher restricting previously published work to see if such a publication would prevent your submission from being considered. This gets us back to where we started. This becomes a contractual issue between you and the publisher.

That is probably a good place to end. Remember, by submitting to a publisher, you are accepting the publisher's offer. In many instances, there will be a time when you can pull the work back after submitting, but there may not be. If the submission guidelines give the publisher the right to print the story upon your submission, it can do just that. If the guidelines, or contract, gives the publisher the right to alter your story and still publish it without your consent, you may find your artistic tragedy has made it to print. But, it may now have a Hollywood ending, no dwarves, and bear no resemblance to what you had in mind when you wrote it. You might also read the guidelines or contract to see haw many rights you have given away. If the guidelines say that the publisher gets all rights in the story, period, then you have given away not only the right to submit the story to another publisher three months down the road, but also any future movie rights, which might become valuable after the work wins a Nebula.

Hey, if we are dreaming, we might as well dream big. While we are at it, let's be sure to copyright protect those dreams and be careful before we give those rights away.

One last note: if you find that your writing is getting accepted and checks made payable to you are flowing in at a regular basis from recognizable publishers, take the time to read through *The Writer's Legal Companion* by Brad Bunnin and Peter Beren.

One Step Too Far
By Steven Richards

The green tide crept up the beach like a living thing, tainted water glittering like emeralds in the hazy glow of the rising sun. The beach sands, littered with debris and exhausted by the recent storm, slipped away in places, sliding further into the dark depths of the ocean, leaving only a thin band behind, a mere fragment of the soft expanse that had once comprised three thousand miles of shoreline. The beauty of the sea still remained, deadly as it was, but the beach's glory had passed away; it would soon leave the towering cliffs of red and black stone to their fate, to be beat upon by the waves until they too surrendered.

Few clouds dotted the sky this morning, and those that were present to greet the morning sun were dingy brown, infected, tainted, just as the waters of the sea. The storms had passed for now; no wind would touch the air today. But beyond them, beyond the sea, beyond the titanic cliffs massed along the shore, the sky still retained its glory, the yellow-orange of sunrise gradually fading to a brilliant blue that would soon spread from one horizon to the other.

He could see their bodies now, littering the beach. Other bodies joined them... Thousands of them, stretching as far as the eye could see. All dead. All because of him.

A figure stirred on the beach, responding to the warming rays of the sun. The sun, then, was untouched by the death. He brushed a strand of kelp from his leg, coughing at the pain in his throat, parched by his journey. How many days had it been? He struggled to sit, but collapsed prone again, arms moving ineffectually to clear the offending debris from his weary body. His eyes opened slowly, and he blinked to clear the sand from his lashes. He pushed at the ground with his arms once more, and this time he succeeded in sitting upright. A startled green crab scurried away, leaving a bloody mark on his ankle as testament to its diet. It was missing two of its legs. He watched it go, giving a sad shake of his head as he turned his attention back to himself. He stared numbly at his clothing, the tatters of what had once been a heavy woolen sweater. It had once been black, but now it was yellow and green, soaked through by the waters. Beneath it was a plain white shirt, still mostly intact, but dotted with red stains of blood. His shoes were gone, and the socks. Most of one navy blue pant leg had been torn off. The other was shredded through in dozens of places along the front, but untouched on the back.

He pulled up the sleeve on his left arm, revealing a bruised mark where his watch had once rested, but no more. His left hand was curled in a fist, clenching an object he could not see or feel, so numb was his body from the cold. He could remember something, holding something…falling. He tried to open the hand, but it would not budge, even when he grasped on the fingers with his right hand. He was too weak.

He stood, unaware of the action until it was done, and swayed unsteadily, afraid that if he thought about it too much, his legs would simply fold up beneath him. He willed his hand to open

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Artist Profile
Jeremy McHugh

Titles

Top Left: *Insect Walker*
Bottom Left: *Faerie Face*
Bottom Right: *Masked Man*

Artist Website: http://www.mchughstudios.com/

Learning to Fly
By Boyd Richardson

Kembert Trail wound along the cliff ledge like a slack rope, rising to the top of a bare granite precipice that overhung the vast Woortwood Forest. More than a thousand feet above the tops of tall burrneedle and broad-leafed woortwood trees, winds gusted in fits like an old man's cough. Mist born of the Kappahydrin Lake, some thirty leagues west, crept through the forest toward the wall of stone. Near the base of the cliff, pinnacles of beaten silver and polished granite rose high above the trees. The Fortant Monastery. The cliff's edge afforded the grandest view of the monastery and its temple, a view worth walking a quarter of a day to see. That view was the only reason the Kembert Trail existed, or so Jorry had heard.

Cheeks red with exertion, Jorry plodded up the trail with a small group of young men behind him. Clutching his red cloak to keep it from blowing away, his steps were uneven. His crooked ankle was sore from the effort of climbing. Jorry hated the attention his stuttered step drew, the look of sympathy from older ladies, the pointing fingers and whispers of younger children, and most of all, the relentless jeers of those who followed him that day. In the small community around the Fortant Monastery, boys had two choices as they grew into manhood: work in the forest or enter the ministry. Fewer and fewer boys chose the ministry, and none of the boys Jorry's age had, including Jorry.

At the midpoint, he was certain he would not make it, but he was more certain that he would not quit. At the top, he would show his "friends" something they would never forget.

His mother had told him to choose whatever he wanted and that he would do well with either choice. She had been wrong. It had taken less than a week for Jorry to realize that the boys his age were harmless compared to those a few years older. Gayge Rennel and Draben Hershook had taken upon themselves the task of changing Jorry's mind about the ministry. First, they had hung his special left shoe that accommodated his twisted foot in a high branch of a burrneedle tree. Jorry had never been much for climbing; heights terrified him. To make matters worse, the tree was in full sap. It had taken more than a month for the dark, sticky stains to wear off his skin. Finally, after a handful of similar stunts, they had succeeded in driving Jorry from the forest. The last and deciding stunt happened on a cold autumn evening. They stripped him to his small clothes, tied each hand to a tree on either side of the lake trail, and left him there over night. Jorry had tried to work things out with their crewmaster but was laughed at when he told the man of the trouble the other boys had given him. "Toughen up," were the man's only words of comfort.

Determination set Jorry's gaze firmly on the trail ahead. At thirteen, he was the only boy over ten years of age who had never been up the trail before. At the midpoint, he was certain he would not make it, but he was more certain that he would not quit. At the top, he would show his "friends" something they would never forget.

Perhaps he should have "toughened up," Jorry had thought time and again after leaving the forest to train in the monastery. The brethren had been considerate of him, but they obviously knew

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TEARS OF MINYA
By Jeff Wheeler

Chapter One
Port of Abyri, Atabyrion

Captain Trillings looked up from the mound of sheaves and scrolls spread across the span of the duty office desk and saw the nobleman. Frayed traces of ribbon, puddles of signet wax, and stencil shavings littered the small corner Trillings had cleared to write the hasty note. He set down the writing tablet and leaned back in the stuffed chair, chewing on the butt of the stylus. Minyan court etiquette inferred that he should rise and bow, but he knew the nobleman would scoff at that.

"Your galleon arrived early, Lord Reim," Trillings said. "I didn't expect you for several more hours yet."

"No salute, Captain Trillings?" the nobleman asked, advancing.

The captain raised his palm and gave one of the Espion hand signs, proving that he was part of the Minyan secret network of spies. "I think the port governor will consider himself snubbed since you came straight to me, my Lord. I apologize I'm not exactly ready for your visit. I would have sent for the Atabyrion lad earlier so he could have greeted you himself. I'm sure he will arrive soon."

"Well enough, but if he's as good as your report suggested he should have been here already, shouldn't he? A member of the Espion must be ready and quick to take advantage of information." The man's green eyes narrowed, scrutinizing Captain Trillings. "But that's only *if* he's as good as you say." He started pacing the room.

Jaylin Warnock isn't punctual, but he is every detail I described him to be. And a perfect match according to Prince Jevin's missive.

Trillings' mouth went dry. Though in his early forties, the nobleman was still stocky yet compact, his face hard-lined and serious. He had the looks of the Tousann family – it was minted on his face like a coin. The slope of his nose, the narrowed temples and high cheekbones, all spoke of his family and his relation to the Sovereign of Minya. A fine wool tabard bearing a badge with a green dragon on a black field fit his body perfectly. There was a jeweled saber belted around his waist, its hilt fastened to the sheath with a golden chain and ribbon. Yet Trillings spied a short sword beneath the yellow-fringed mantle. Of course Lord Reim would carry another weapon – he was an Espion after all. The nobleman's hair and goatee were graying, neatly trimmed in the Minyan fashion, not long and loose as those from Atabyrion wore. Trillings' was cropped just short of his shoulders, a concession to both fashions. Being a Minyan in the port city of Abyri in Atabyrion was not always easy. As captain of the legion sheriffs, he walked a spiked fence of custom and bureaucracy. There were wolves on each side.

Trillings leaned forward. "If my letters didn't convince you, would you be here yourself? You

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he and his master were Ileshian.

"Are we safe?" Edel squeaked. The Jahd frequently raided Ilesh's frontier holdings and had managed to repulse all attempts by the High King's professional army to pacify the high country. They neither traded nor engaged in diplomacy with Ilesh. Many Ileshians held the Jahd to be little more than animals who killed on sight and were incapable of any restraint. Yet he and his frail master were alone in the village of a Jahd clan, leagues from the nearest Ileshian castle and beyond any hope of aid.

Uren flashed a grin his nervous apprentice's way. "Safe? Oh no, not at all. I couldn't imagine a more dangerous situation." Still grinning, the pilgrim patted his trembling apprentice's shoulder. "They respect courage, lad. Try to remember that." With that he strode after the column, which was dragging their handful of wounded on litters after them.

In the centuries since the High King's invasion of Cyllhn, no Ileshian had learned the Jahd tongue. The ways of the Jahd warrior nations were unknown even to the Kral Kings who had ruled here for centuries before the arrival of the Ileshian invaders. You could not spend an hour at an inn anywhere in Western Ilesh without hearing a tale of Jahd brutality. Providence held no record of an Ileshian or Kral seeing the home of a gutzal and returning to tell the tale. Despite all that, this was Uren's second visit. The spindly member of the Order of the Pilgrim had been welcomed by these barbarians, taught something of their language, and even allowed to return with an apprentice. For his part, the old man wanted an assistant so what he was learning of the Jahd could be preserved for Prosperity. To everyone's surprise, not least Edel, Uren had selected him from the multitudes of possible assistants. Barely a year in the Order, and still caught by the habits and small luxuries of the life of a third son of a petty noble, Edel knew he was too inexperienced to live up to such an honor. Worse yet, he did not want to be here. Like many of his peers, he had grown up hating and fearing the Jahd. The Order had attracted him because he wanted to escape the muck and blood of the frontier. His dream was to be Curator of the ancient library in Mulienne, not trudge through the freezing mud and dangerous mountains of the high country. Gaping at the heads skewered atop the village's sharp palisade, Edel knew he and his master would never return. At least some of the twisted faces that peered down at him from the spikes were Ileshian, and Edel wondered how long it would be before he joined them. Considering flight, he glanced over his shoulder and found himself being watched by a behemoth of a Jahd warrior, whose bald head was covered in tattoos.

"Ilkau!" the warrior barked, and roared with laughter when Edel jumped and almost fell. Uren did not break stride or turn, but Edel had the distinct impression his master was smirking. "Try not to fall, Edel. I'm not sure what they will do if you did."

As master and apprentice neared the open gate into the village, they saw a collection of children, none of them more than ten years old, standing within the breach. They lacked the tattoos of their parents, but they wore the same thick belt and skirt. Instead of edged weapons, the young Jahd all bore poles, which were decorated with feathers and other charms.

"Courage," Uren whispered. Edel was about to ask what his master meant when the children rushed towards them, shrieking at the tops of their lungs and brandishing their poles as weapons. The terrified apprentice started to shuffle backward until he saw Uren's warning frown. "Courage," the old man urged with a slight nod of his head. Following the old pilgrim's nod, Edel saw two adult Jahd looking on with spears held at the ready. Beyond them was a large gathering of Jahd, who seemed to be watching the proceedings with a critical eye. The children rushed up to within arms length of the two Ileshians before redoubling their screaming and threatening gestures. Yet they did not attack, and though the display was disconcerting, Edel found something of the courage Uren had called for. Standing in front of the excited young Jahd, the apprentice realized the real danger was

the adults who were judging how he and Uren would react. He had no way of knowing what alien code of conduct dictated this behavior or what the gutzal considered the proper response, but clearly Uren was not surprised by the display and had survived his last visit. So Edel did his best to follow his master's lead and appear unaffected by the children's performance, until one of the older girls danced forward out of the line of her peers. Before the apprentice could react, she slapped Uren's wrist with her hand. The blow was rewarded with loud cheers from the on-looking adults, and the old pilgrim was lashed with hoots of derision from the other children. Apparently emboldened by the girl's success, a younger boy sprang from the crowd and made a clumsy swing at Edel. The apprentice had first trained to be a Guardsman, and without thinking he sidestepped the young Jahd's attack, and as the screaming boy lunged past, Edel swiped him on the behind to send him tumbling on his way.

"Oh dear," Uren breathed as the gutzal fell silent. "I wish you hadn't done that," he remonstrated his pale-faced apprentice.

"What," Edel began, but his question was lost in the screams of the Jahd. He was scooped bodily into the air, first by the children and then by their parents. The apprentice's sobs for mercy went unheeded as he was borne into the village upon the yelling mass of Jahd. When they reached a massive open fire, he was dropped unceremoniously on the ground before the spot where a hog was cooking. It seemed every member of the gutzal descended upon him, patting and addressing him, before taking their own places around the fire. When his master reached him, the bruised apprentice was frowning in confusion at the smiling Jahd faces, which kept looking his way from around the fire.

"You really shouldn't have done that," the old man said with a tired sigh. "You're a man now in their eyes," he explained.

* * *

The circle of sweating men struggled with the thick bole until it slid down into its new home. The effort left Edel exhausted, but it was only the first of the trunks that would make up the stout wall the Jahd were building. While Edel might have struggled with the hard labor, his master looked close to collapse, and the apprentice paused to help Uren slog through the churned mud toward a pile of trunks.

"Thank you," the old pilgrim rasped. Worried for his master, Edel watched him intently for a moment, looking for some sign the old man's health was failing him. Seeing his concern, Uren waved him away, "I'm fine, just a bit out of breath."

Unwilling to be so easily chased off, Edel took his master by the arm. "You should rest."

"And lose whatever respect they have for us?" Uren countered, motioning to where a knot of elderly Jahd stood watching their labors with a critical eye.

Edel was about to answer when his master slipped in the mud, knocking the apprentice down with him. The workers and onlookers roared with laughter as the two Ileshians flopped in the deep mud. After a few moments, the Jahd lifted Uren to his feet and helped him to a dry spot where he was left to sit and grab his breath. In contrast, Edel received no help. Instead, a young Jahd warrior, with an easy smile, grabbed the apprentice by the shoulder and started to help him up, before pushing him back down into the muck. The other Jahd clearly enjoyed the display, and their laughter only got worse when Edel blushed. Losing his temper, Edel lunged to his feet and bowled the laughing young Jahd to the ground. He even managed to land a punch or two before the amused warrior cuffed him away. Lying dazed and winded upon the ground, Edel tensed when the young Jahd towered over him, but instead of striking, the warrior laughed and patted the apprentice's

shoulder.

"Ut bral ek, Edel," the young Jahd pronounced with a grin. When Edel frowned, the warrior patted his own chest, "Utz, your friend." At that the young warrior turned on his heel and rejoined the Jahd laboring to build the warrior. Exhausted, miserable and confused by the incomprehensible ways of their hosts, Edel struggled his way to where his master sat.

"Well… it seems your standing in their eyes is left intact, even if mine is not," Edel gasped as he flopped down beside his master.

"Oh, on the contrary," the old pilgrim answered with a shake of his head. "You are judged by a higher standard. You're a man," he explained, before groaning when the Jahd motioned for them to come help with the next bole.

* * *

Though he knew he was driving his master to distraction, Edel was finally beginning to grasp enough of the Jahd's guttural tongue to make himself understood. His efforts invariably left their hosts in hysterics, but he could read some grudging respect in their eyes as he struggled with their language. Seated beside Uren, who was wearily eating hand to mouth, Edel watched the gutzal carouse. Three drums were being beaten in a lively rhythm to accompany the meal and the dancing that weaved around the fire. On the surface, the Jahd's behavior appeared violent, base and brutal, but as he watched a Jahd lass threaten an older warrior who had been making unwanted advances, he recognized much of their behavior was for show. Though he was still terrified by the Jahd, at least he no longer found them quite so unpredictable.

He was about to say as much to Uren when the master silenced him with a gesture, "Watch."

Turning back to the heated exchange, Edel saw the older warrior give up on the girl as too much effort. He shrugged and turned for a drink. With a shriek, the girl lunged after him and slit the surprised graying Jahd's throat where he stood. The gurgling and gasping warrior clutched once at his throat and tried to turn to face the girl before he collapsed dead amongst his fellow warriors, who did not even stop eating. The only reaction to the attack was the drums falling silent. The twitching body was only a matter of feet from the pilgrim and apprentice, and Edel stared transfixed at the murdered Jahd. The girl spat at the fallen warrior before drawing the hooked knife, which the Jahd call a lurgh, from his belt and brandishing it above her head. She screamed something unintelligible to the Jahd pressed around the fire, but none said a word or even made eye contact with the shaking lass.

Confused, Edel started to ask Uren for an explanation, but the old man clutched his wrist and hissed, "Not a word, and do not look at her, or we're both dead men." The apprentice stared intently into the fire while the Jahd girl continued screaming at the eating gutzal. She flung the knife into the fire before retaking her place and resuming her meal. Edel watched in horror as the puddle of blood from the dead warrior inched towards him. When a Jahd shoved a plate piled with meat under his nose, the young apprentice turned green, sprang to his feet and lurched away into the dark, the sound of the resumed frenzied drumbeat following after.

In the low country, autumn would barely be making its presence known, and as Edel sat shivering in the bitter wind, he pined for his distant milder home. The wooded lanes of his father's estate would be vibrant with the reds and golds of the turning season, and the various inns that dotted the countryside would have warm hearths and good company in the bars. Yet instead of warming himself before a crackling fire or enjoying the fellowship of folk who had known him since he was a babe, Edel sat freezing on the cold unfriendly ground, within the home a strange and brutal

people.

"Are they so incomprehensible?" Uren asked from behind him. The apprentice grunted without turning. The old man settled upon the ground and let out a contented sigh, despite the fact his joints were obviously stiff and causing him pain. Uren was smiling at the mountains, apparently untroubled by the murder they had witnessed, the danger they were in, or the trials of this brutal place.

Edel eyed his master, who at that moment he found as incomprehensible as the Jahd. "She did not have to kill him. He'd backed down."

The old man kept drinking in the pristine view, but he answered Edel with a shrug, "Yes she did. It's there way." Sick of the cold, sick of the mountains, sick of the Jahd, and most of all, sick of his eccentric master, the apprentice stood and threw up his hands.

"That's right, they're barbarians. Wildbloods… and we're probably going to die up here. For what? There's nothing for Providence to learn from these creatures. They're evil!" Edel snarled. Yet Uren remained unmoved, and after a few moments the apprentice found his rage fading into dismay. "We're going to die amongst folks such as this."

Finally the old man tore his gaze from the view, but not without some obvious regret. "Perhaps we will, but you're wrong you know." He patted the young man's hands. "She killed because the gutzal cannot afford a weak link. Winter is coming and they will have to fight to survive. She judged him unfit, and the gutzal agreed."

"Better he raped her?" Edel countered, though he found himself thinking the old man was making some kind of sense.

Uren shook his head, "It is an Ileshian failing to judge others by our standards. A gutzal must be strong or it is destroyed by its neighbors. Providence and our people can indeed learn something from these folk. Yes they are brutal, but their life is harsh and they do what must be done to survive. Our folk engage in casual cruelty and call it progress and morality. I know which folk I would rather live amongst." At that the old man rose and stomped away.

* * *

In the weeks that followed, Edel did his best to keep an open mind about their hosts. Once again he saw their brutality as something other than mere barbarism. It was as Uren had observed; the gutzal did what was necessary to survive, nothing more or less. If they treated the old master with cautious courtesy, they expected nothing less of Edel than they would of any of the other young men of their village. As the seasons turned and the snows came, the young Ileshian became stronger and more self-assured than he would ever have thought possible when living in the shadow of his older brothers. In turn, the Jahd seemed to expect more and more of him.

As often happens in the high country, a bitter gale brought with it the kind of driving rain that can soak a man in moments and find the flaw in even the surest of shelter. Huddled within the lean-to the Jahd had forced Edel to make with his own hands, master and apprentice worked at the never-ending daily task of recording what they had learned of the Jahd and their ways. Stopping occasionally to warm his hands upon their spluttering candle, the old man recounted to Edel his latest discovery about their hosts. Shaking almost too much to hold his quill, the apprentice recorded Uren's words in their leather-bound journal. The wind was so loud they did not hear the approach of the warriors until they were at the door. The young blonde-haired warrior, Utz, who in recent weeks had earned the mark of the boar, pushed aside the covering and peered into their shelter. He greeted

them with a grunt and a few words in his tongue. When Edel did not move, he jerked his head to motion over his shoulder.

"Come," he snarled, in a strangled version of Ileshian.

Edel set down his quill and frowned, "What is amiss?" he asked. Uren laid a restraining hand on the young man's wrist, but the apprentice rose when Utz motioned again for him to follow.

"You must come," the Jahd warrior repeated, before saying something to his master, which Edel could not follow. The old man sighed and shook his head as he offered a clipped reply.

"What?" the apprentice asked first Uren, then Utz.

"Trouble," the pilgrim finally explained. Edel reached for his cloak, but once again Uren laid a restraining hand upon him.

Confused, the apprentice met his master's troubled stare, "I should help."

"It's not your place."

Perhaps sensing the meaning, if not the content, of the exchange between master and apprentice, Utz nodded to Edel. "Come."

Edel pulled his hand free before scooping up his cloak, "You said it yourself; they regard me as a man of the gutzal. If they need help, I must do so or lose their trust." With that the young man stormed out with Utz, though he was already beginning to feel some reservation about what adversity would require such an earnest summons.

To Edel's surprise, the gathering place was almost deserted. Rather than all the able-bodied warriors of the gutzal, which he expected to find waiting, there were only three other young men.

"Where are the others?" the apprentice managed to ask in the Jahd tongue. Frowning over the question, Utz motioned to the waiting warriors and gave a sharp nod; this apparently was the rest. One of the other warriors, a sandy-haired giant named Runk, grinned in greeting before producing something from his belt and handing it to Edel. It was a lurgh, the barbed knife that symbolized the honor of a Jahd warrior. Edel accepted the proffered weapon with no small amount of trepidation. It was then he realized no one bore any other weapon, only their lurghs. "Perhaps it will be alright after all," he squeaked. "Uren's mothering has made me nervous," he tried to assure himself, but something about the hard expressions on the faces of his companions told him he was in real trouble.

* * *

The four young warriors and Edel hurried through the freezing night, their breaths coming in white puffs before them. The frosty ground crunched under their footfalls, and the apprentice could barely see more than a few feet, but his companions moved swift and sure along the valley. Despite their lack of arms, Edel could sense the grim determination of his companions, and the few times he slipped on the treacherous ground, he earned nervous scowls from the Jahd.

"Why didn't I listen to Uren," the apprentice shivered as the small party paused to catch their breath within a copse of trees. Utz produced a flask, which he thrust at Edel. Having experienced Jahd kabaal before, Edel lifted the flask to his lips, but the smell was even more awful than the Jahd liquor. Utz's exasperated expression made the apprentice realize he had been mistaken in assuming it was a drink meant to warm him. The impatient warrior snatched the flask back, poked his fingers past the lid, and scooped out a pile of thick black paste. Clucking like a mother scolding a child, Utz smeared the glob of sticky stuff across Edel's forehead.

Utz snarled something, which took Edel a few moments to translate, "Walk in shadow and pass unseen." With a groan the apprentice realized what was happening and smeared more of the foul smelling stuff over his exposed skin. As he watched the others doing the same and drawing

their knives, Edel knew this was a raid.

The sentry stretched and yawned, oblivious to the youthful intruders crouched below him. Utz, Runk, Edel and the others held their breaths while the sleepy Jahd peered into the inky blackness of the forest for a few minutes. Apparently satisfied by the quiet, the warrior walked away to resume his watch. Unlike his companions, who exchanged triumphant grins, it took every ounce of his will for Edel to fight against his terrified nausea. Unaware of his Ileshian companion's fear, Utz motioned for the party to enter the village before the sentry could return. The sight of Runk scaling the wall only made Edel feel worse, but when Utz offered his hand, the apprentice accepted the boost and climbed after his huge companion.

"What am I doing?" he murmered to himself as he tottered atop the wall for a moment before swinging over the top and dropping within. From what Edel could gather from Utz, this was the home of gutzal that had been waging a blood feud against his hosts for many years. If they were caught… well, they must not let themselves be caught. It seemed the leader of this gutzal was the principle reason for the feud, and the purpose of the raid was to somehow deal with him. Though once he aspired to be nothing more than a soldier, life in the Order had changed Edel. Now the notion of cold-blooded murder was unsettling, and though determined not to let Utz and the others down, the apprentice was unsure whether he would be able to kill, even to save the lives of the gutzal that had accepted him.

Given the hour, the village was silent and dark; even the gutzal's beardogs were snuggled in their kennels to shelter from the miserable cold. Edel's fingers felt frozen to the bone, and as he followed his eager companions, he risked a momentary pause to blow a shaking breath upon his hands. It was a weakness that saved the apprentice's life. Leaping from the shadows of one of the huts came a warrior with long plats down his back. Before Edel could give a warning cry, the fierce Jahd threw a spear at the raiders with a scream. Even having seen the throw, Edel barely ducked aside, but the barbed spear struck Runk in the lower back, toppling the huge warrior with a grunt. Sparing only a brief glance for his fallen friend, Utz grabbed Edel and set off at a run, while ordering their companions to deal with the defender. Even as they raced past the next hut, the village exploded with warning screams and bellowed oaths.

"We're dead," Edel whimpered, but Utz dragged him on, ducking through the confusion of the entire enemy gutzal emptying into the night. With a shove, Utz hurried the Ileshian apprentice under one of the huts before following after. Fully roused, the gutzal screamed around the village in a vain search for them, but for the moment the two remained undiscovered.

Oblivious of the multitudes of warriors baying for their blood, Utz motioned to a nearby hut. "Leader's daughter."

Horrified, Edel rounded on his companion, his fear momentarily forgotten, "We're here to kill the leader's daughter?" For whatever reason, Utz regarded the Ileshian with a perplexed expression. "We kill daughter?" Edel tried again.

The young Jahd snorted, as though Edel had made a joke, "No… slap, then feud over."

"Slap!" the confused apprentice cried, attracting the attention of the gutzal. Three warriors dove in under the hut after them, while another cleaved at the hut's floor with his huge axe. Flashing a black look Edel's way, Utz squirmed towards the warriors, with nothing more than his lurgh in his teeth.

"Go… slap," he commanded around the knife, and shoved Edel the other way.

Too terrified to be confused, Edel set off at a sprint towards the hut Utz had pointed out. He felt, as much as saw, another spear flash past, but before any one could intercede, the Ileshian reached the hut and dove through the window. Winded and disorientated, and aware of the outraged

and approaching bellows of the gutzal, Edel struggled upright on the reed floor and came face-to-face with one of the most striking Jahd lasses he had yet seen. The bangs of her short blonde hair accentuated the young woman's high cheekbones, and her intense green eyes regarded the startled apprentice with curiosity.

"Are you to be my husband?" she asked in halting Ileshian as she placed her hands on her hips. There was something very disarming about her as she stood defiantly before him, and Edel was so surprised it took a moment for what she had said to sink in.

He froze, and blushed under the impatient scrutiny of the leader's daughter, "Excuse me?"

The young woman's expression softened, and her face lit with the most beautiful smile Edel had ever seen, "You will suffice. Together we will end the bloodshed."

* * *

The old man sighed and rested his chin on his hands while he stared mournfully at the distant mountains.

"And?" Boel asked, his deference for his ancient master forgotten, replaced by his passion for the story and fascination with the boy this old man had once been. His master had served his apprenticeship amongst the Jahd? He had lived such a life of danger and excitement, and was now content to serve in this backwater Abbey?

Edel pushed himself back from the window and the view with a sigh, "I never laid a hand upon her. I tried to run and was captured. The gutzal where I had been staying had to trade many cattle for my return, and none of the young Jahd survived the raid. Uren was furious of course… and disappointed. He dismissed me. I was sent to finish my apprenticeship here and never saw him again."

The apprentice chewed upon this somber revelation until he was unable to contain himself any longer. "And the regret? Did you regret not ending the feud, failing your master or the gutzal, losing your place as his apprentice, or leaving the high country?"

"I regret many things, my young friend," Edel replied with a bittersweet smile as he remembered a beautiful face full of the promise of a life he had shunned for all the wrong reasons. "I was a coward," he coughed, and to Boel's surprise the melancholy old man grinned. "If we had been married she would have killed me within a month."

The End

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again, and still it refused. He whistled softly through clenched teeth, choking back tears. His free hand came up and brushed sand and muck from the black stubble on his face and neck. How long had he lain here? How long had he been in the ocean? Where were the kestrels that had welcomed him the last time he visited these shores? Surely they could not all be dead.

But they were. He could see their bodies now, littering the beach. Other bodies joined them, bodies of innumerable creatures of sea, land and air alike. Thousands of them, stretching as far as the eye could see. All dead. All because of him.

He beat at his left hand, and finally it sprang open, a black plastic object falling to the sand. He stared down at it, remembering instantly what it was. Grooves were cut along its flat side, and a sliver of metal only a half-inch long jutted from one end; his knife. *Falling…* he jerked his head up, covering his ears to block out the screaming. Was it the screaming *then*, or now? He didn't know, nor did he care. He opened his eyes again and stamped down on the knife handle, burying it in the sand and almost losing his balance in the process.

He removed his hands from his ears and ran them through his bleached hair, ignoring the tears coursing down his cheeks. The experiment had failed; he knew even without traversing the cliffs, just as he knew he would regardless. To see *this*, the last of the Continents left after the cataclysm. The lift was still there, damaged by the storms but apparently intact; rusted but not destroyed. He stumbled down the thin strip of beach towards the cliffs. Maybe something had survived on the other side… maybe it had been sheltered…

Or maybe it was as dead there as here; the Romin Ecology had failed. When he reached the lift, the gate would not open, and he lashed out at it with his foot. The metal clanged, but did not give, and he fell to the ground, flakes of rust raining down around him. He uttered a hoarse scream as his chafed and raw flesh scraped along the sand. Then he was upright again, his fury overwhelming the pain and weakness as he beat on the gate with his bare fists. One hinge-bolt broke with a sharp *snap*, and the gate bent inwards. He climbed over it into the metal cage of the lift and wrenched the control lever all the way down with one hand. The lever snapped off in his hand upon hitting its stop, but the lift lurched into motion, rocking violently as it lifted from its skewed perch on the beach. The lift had been dragged to the side by the storm, and it swung like a pendulum for a moment before settling down, carrying its lone passenger up the barren side of the cliff. The beach receded beneath the man's gaze, until the tiny bodies of the dead creatures were mere specks below. He turned away from the sight, looking upwards and mouthing a silent apology. As his fury faded, he sought justification for what he had done. It had been in the name of science, this experiment.

But so was the M-Bomb, he reminded himself. So irresponsible…didn't science have any room for morals? It was no good, he knew, these excuses. There was no defense for what he had done to this planet. He had sought to perfect what he saw as flawed, but had only succeeded in destroying what was already perfect…if this planet had been inhabited…it would have been too much to bear. Even now, it was almost too much. In the beginning, when he had presented the idea, he had wanted to test it on a populated world…

The bodies had first started showing up only a few weeks past…a month at the most; so short a time, so great a failure…the lift crested the edge of the cliff, and he stepped out onto firm soil, surveying the land he had left behind only weeks ago.

So Foothold had not been safe. Nothing had been safe. This planet held only death now. *If it had been populated…*

Such miniscule changes, so seemingly insignificant; they had multiplied exponentially, greater and greater…after the Generators failed, the storms moved in. And they had reached even here, the first of his facilities. Many of the others had already been destroyed or inundated. The last storm…

where had the ship gone? He could remember…

His fists tightened until his ragged nails almost broke the skin of his palms. Foothold was still there, but only in technical terms. The Complex was there, and the hydroponics farms, though the external farms were now devoid of life as well. The lab's glass skylights had been broken in by the storm; everything inside would have been destroyed, but he did not intend on visiting it again. What was the use? It held nothing of use now. The Complex could provide food and shelter, at least, until he could ready the Capsule for departure.

Falling…the ship was destroyed as well; it must have been.

He staggered down the hill, feeling the dead brown grass snap beneath his feet and scrape across his ankles. More dead animals littered the ground here, rotting in peace without scavengers to make a meal of them. The cypress trees he had planted around Foothold had withered and died, most of them toppled, ripped from the ground by the storm, roots and all. The animal pens had been broken open; some contained bodies, some did not. None contained all their charges. The electric fences lay lifeless on the ground, snakes that had given their last hiss.

As he reached the bottom of the hill, the Complex filled his vision, and he stumbled into the entryway. The heavy doors with their thick nee-glaz windows remained intact, and a green light glowed above the control panel on the right-hand door. He tapped in his entry code, almost as surprised that he remembered it as that they opened when the command went through. Warm air wafted out, beckoning, and he entered the embrace willingly. The doors closed silently behind him, sealing out that dreadful silence.

He ate and drank, but left his clothing and his wounds alone, self-inflicted payment for what he had done. Responsibility was a thing people strived for, but it could be a curse as well as a blessing. The six-legged crab was proof he had failed in his responsibility. To his knowledge, it was the last living creature; the data from the satellites had not been complete, but he had seen enough before…the storm.

The last living creature…aside from me. The crab had not even been a native creature; ironic, it seemed, that two alien creatures were the last things left alive…no… perhaps the hydroponics…

He rushed from the room. The greenhouses had appeared intact from outside, but had their precious contents survived? The corridors passed in a blur, and he found himself swinging open the blue metal door to the hydroponics area.

"Why?" he said. "How?" It was all dead. He entered the greenhouse, looking for the cause of their death. He found it quickly enough; a fist-sized hole punched in one wall, the branch responsible still protruding through, but only partially blocking the breach.

"Why am I still alive!" he shouted, grasping the branch with both hands. He threw his weight away from it, and the panel shattered. He swung the branch over his head and slammed it against the floor, ignoring the sound of shattering glass as containers and bottles were swept off the racks behind him. The branch broke in two, and he threw the piece in his hands through another glass panel.

"Why me?" he raged. "Why is everything else dead?"

Showered, and wearing a fresh change of clothes, the man headed back up the hill, this time carrying a pair of heavy-duty bolt-cutters, still coated with gleaming paint, metal unscratched, never used. He approached the lift and looked down at the beach below.

"I'm sorry!" he called down, wiping away fresh tears with the back of one bandaged hand. Perhaps the crab was still left to hear; perhaps not.

When does it go too far, this science? He took the bolt-cutters in both hands and snipped through

the lift cable in one smooth motion. The control cable snapped like a rotten rope as the lift dropped from the miniature crane's protruding arm, rebounding once off the side of the cliff before crashing onto the ground far below. He threw the cutters down after the lift, then turned and walked back to the Complex.

He knew there was not much time. Those final changes…he could feel it now in the air, in everything; it would not be long before he too succumbed. Already, the air was growing stale, and a strange, biting taste permeated it. Death.

The Capsule was ready. The computer had prepared the engines, calculated the trajectory; everything was set. All that awaited him was the press of a button. He stood there, looking at the confining walls around him. Foothold had been his home for three years. But he would not leave it; the charges had been set. The only evidence that would remain was the marker he had planted deep in the dead forest beyond Foothold. The other facilities were already destroyed; there was a chance that some evidence of them had survived, but he could do nothing about that. Foothold itself would be destroyed in the wake of the Capsule's nuclear-fusion engines; it would set off the charges…the cliff, the lift…and the crab, if it was still alive; all would be destroyed. Beyond that, the world would remain, barren, lifeless.

Perhaps some distant corner of the globe still contained life…some organism, deep beneath the sea, untouched…no; it had extended into the sea as well. If the planet was not totally dead now, it would be within days. "None will play God with worlds again," he said, addressing the empty room. "That should be left to Him. I'll tell them of what I've done…" his hands began to tremble, and his voice cracked, "…*of what happens when we go too far…*" He entered the capsule and strapped himself inside its milky white cocoon. The hatch sealed, and the engines hummed to life, tanks fueled to their limits by the Complex's central computer.

"When science fails, remember that men are not gods,
but created beings and flawed in their own arrogance.
Remember this world, my experiment, my machines.
My greatest mistake.
–Malcus Romin, 2479"

A pillar of fire raced into the sky, a rolling wave of molten dirt and rock spreading out beneath it as the spacecraft's engines set off the charges throughout Foothold. The green tide bubbled and screeched as it boiled, a massive cloud of steam intermixing with the smoke and dust. The fires spread, and the dead trees of the forest began to burn, leaving charred stumps behind as they collapsed in the oppressive wave of heat.

The marker remained. A radio beacon deep in its core broadcast a homing signal, powered by an atomic generator that would last for three thousand years. The marker was unharmed by the flames, its etched message unscathed and awaiting whoever next set foot on this world, that history's mistakes would not be forgotten.

The End

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why he was there. Everyone knew he had failed in the forest and joined the monastery as a second choice. Jorry's shame had not subsided until an accidental discovery in the history library sparked a hope that had been missing for a long time.

Centuries earlier, the brethren's abilities had been developed in many ways to face the needs of war and taming a wild forest. After the village had constructed a thick wall around its border and when the armies retreated, many of the skills the brethren learned faded with the passing of time. One of the more fabled, but most uncommon, had been the ability to fly. Only a handful of legendary brethren were ever purported to have been able to fly, and very few of even the staunchest believers in the village thought there was any truth to those legends.

Yet one day in the middle of the previous winter, while Jorry had been fulfilling his tedious assignment of cataloguing some of the older histories, he made an amazing discovery. In the back third of a history of a failed heatherstone mine located a day's ride south of Fortant were four hollowed pages. Within the hiding place had been a large parchment folded in quarters. The instructions on the parchment described the methods Brother Yerrig had used over four hundred years earlier to fly up and down the mineshaft.

Initially, Jorry thought the instructions were simple and the two elements would be easily met. He soon learned patience. First, Jorry needed to find seven herbs and prepare them for a tea. Some were to be dried, others were to be pressed, and one had to be gathered fresh on the morning of the brewing. It took several months, but by mid-spring, Jorry had found all of the herbs. The writing warned that the second element was a formidable test of faith. Only one "who had unshakable faith in the creators and nature could escape the binding of man to ground." Re-learning a lost art like this would change how others viewed him. A century from now, his name would be in the history books.

As Jorry slipped on a loose section of trail, he felt warm liquid where the deerskin sleeve rested against his side. The rotten stopper had a crack. He would have to be careful or he would wear the tea, and that would do him no good.

"Why don't you just fly to the top?" a tall, handsome boy named Weldrick quipped.

"I'll make it," Jorry retorted, feeling more confident than he expected, but regretting that he had told the others that he could fly. It would have made a better surprise if he had kept the secret.

"I wouldn't be in a hurry either, Wel, if I was just going to meet the forest ghosts." Fenn flashed his cynical smile at the tall boy.

Jorry kept moving up the trail. He wanted to ask about forest ghosts as he had never heard of them before, but just as likely as not, Fenn was baiting him. There probably were no such things, but by asking, Jorry would open himself to more ridicule. He forced his mind to a silent prayer.

"I'll bet Jorry don't know nothin' 'bout no ghosts. The Brethren probably keep those secrets hid up in the monastery," Halwin added, joining the others in a smile. Halwin's missing upper front-left tooth evidenced his propensity toward fighting. Many times, Halwin had slugged Jorry in the stomach without saying a word before or after. Jorry was just glad that Halwin did not consider it fun to beat up a smaller boy with a twisted foot who didn't fight back.

Jorry kept walking, his steps feeling lighter as he repeated the prayer in his mind.

"Maybe he doesn't know about them," Fenn said. "Of course, he would know all about them had he stayed on with the company." Then, catching up to Jorry and putting a halting hand on his shoulder, Fenn went on. "We've seen them. We've felt them, Jorry. Draben's dad said the forest ghosts belong to the souls of those who jumped from the cliff."

"You're lying." Jorry shook his head and pulled free of Fenn's grip. He marched up the slope while the boys behind continued to talk about strange things they had seen in the forest. With his mind occupied by thoughts of the ghosts of people who had jumped to their death on the same cliff

they were climbing, he was no longer able to achieve peace through his prayer. That could prove dangerous, so he decided to let the others finish their stories and then clear his mind of the matter. "So, have any of you talked to these ghosts?"

Jorry felt a sting on his neck where Halwin slapped him. He was used to the feeling, but it stung like fire, all the same. Halwin warned, "Mind yourself, or you'll get worse."

"Of course we don't talk to them," Fenn answered. "There's nothing to be gained by talking to ghosts and plenty to lose. Soulless, they are."

Jorry did not believe there were any ghosts. But he was even more certain that if there were ghosts, that they were the spirits of men and women, and all men have souls. Shaking his head, Jorry continued up the trail, trying to put a small gap between himself and Halwin. "The monastery walls themselves proclaim all men have souls. If you say the ghosts are from men, then they must have souls."

Weldrick laughed scornfully. "You're the Brother-in-training, or do you waste your time in the study hall like you did in the forest? You should read about what happens to those who give their lives away. I expect you'd find that those who kill themselves lose their souls and are trapped on this world."

The others laughed at Jorry's ignorance. Of course he knew that, and why he said something so ignorant, he did not know. He had a way of saying things that made him look less intelligent than he was. Especially around them. Blushing, he sought solid footholds on a steep part of the trail so that he could maintain his pace. He would have the last victory that day. "Okay, you're right. But, still, why are you afraid to talk to them -- soulless or not?" Another sting at the back of his head let him know that he had not created enough separation between Halwin and himself. Halwin said, "Who says we're afraid? It's like Fenn said, no good can come of it."

Jorry remembered another myth associated with spirits of those who took their own lives and was able to mention it before the others made him feel more ignorant. "I understand there's also the risk that they might try to take possession of your soul."

"Ha! I knew you'd studied what happens to those who kill themselves!" Weldrick gloated. "Probably thought about doing it a dozen times a week, eh?"

Jorry burned with frustration. It was true, but it was a truth about himself that he would rather not consider and certainly not be ridiculed over. He struggled to calm his thoughts; it would be essential for his mind to be at peace if he was to fly. Glancing back to see how close the others were, Jorry caught a glimpse of what appeared to be Fenn scowling at Weldrick and shaking his head as Halwin laughed. Upon second glance, Jorry thought he might have just imagined it.

As they neared the peak, the wind blew hard, and Jorry had to lean into it to keep upright. The trail hugged the death drop. Had the wind stopped, Jorry would have tumbled over the edge without a hope of flying. He wanted to just crawl up the last of the slope but would not give the others the satisfaction.

At the peak, boulders stacked upon each other like sacks of grain, mounting up twice the height of Weldrick. The others sat on the lower rocks and pulled cloaks tightly around themselves, backs against the wind. Jorry's crooked ankle ached like fire, but he knew if he stopped there it would be harder to finish the chore. He carefully chose handholds and places to step as he scaled the boulders. At the top, it took him an awkward moment to figure out how to swing his legs under his body without falling. Eventually, he scooted into sitting position and looked out over the forest below. Far below. When in the monastery, the cliff seamed to reach the sky, but from its pinnacle, the height appeared far greater. Death awaited any who misjudged the wind or tempted the cliff's edge. Yet if the wind relented, the blue skies and vibrant, varied shades of forest green would have been

more beautiful than a master artist's painting. When Jorry faced the wind to look out, his eyes started watering almost instantly.

Mist covered much of the forest, completely obscuring the temple and rushing toward the cliff face. Jorry laughed in spite of himself, the one time he climbed to the peak that offered a king's view of the forest, and he was robbed of the chance to see its finest jewel.

"Well, what're you waitin' for?" Halwin yelled over his shoulder. Then, he threw a stone over the edge. They watched the small rock tumble through the air until it disappeared. Trees below that reached nearly a hundred feet into the air looked like tindersticks.

"Hold tight. I have to get ready." Jorry uncorked the stopper of the deerskin and let the warm tea wash down his throat. Most teas tasted like rotten swamp water, but this one was sweet and refreshing. The herbs and dried leaves crushed into fine powder reminded him of sweet yams and honeysuckle. He thought dryly of the other boys' inconvenience of having to wait a few moments to see him jump.

Fenn nervously offered, "Jorry, you don't really have to jump."

Jorry was not sure he had heard Fenn correctly, but the other boys' reaction affirmed that he had.

"You gittin' soft, Fenn?" Halwin challenged.

"Yeah, we didn't come all this way on a down day just to walk the gimp back off the mountain," Weldrick added.

"If you want to see his blood, Hal, punch him in the nose. But this is death we're talking about." Fenn stood and stared at the others.

"Maybe you just don't want to meet his ghost in the forest." Weldrick also rose, looming over the shorter Fenn.

"Do you?" Fenn asked.

Weldrick said nothing. After a short pause, Halwin offered, "I ain't afraid of ghosts, and that goes for ghosts that used to be Jorry."

Jorry did not know what to think of Fenn sticking up for him, but it felt good. "If you will all be quiet for just a moment, I'll be ready." He tucked the empty deerskin under his red robes and cinched the rope belt tight. Then, with the others in silence, he rehearsed the solemnity prayer three times. It had worked twice in his bedchambers, but he had only risen a few spans off the ground for a short while. Yet the writings of Brother Yerrig indicated that the test of faith was the critical element. What better way to test his faith than to put his life in the balance? Jorry scooted to the edge of the top boulder and took a deep breath.

"Don't do it. You don't have to do it." Fenn's voice was nearly a plea. The others were quiet and their expressions blank.

Jorry wondered if they expected him to back out. He looked down and felt his chest constrict in fear. He had to overcome it, rise above the fear. Nothing but faith mattered now. Nothing else would save him. A forceful gust nearly pulled him from the ledge before he was ready. His stomach wanted to force the tea back up. Jorry swallowed, closed his eyes, and forced steady breaths into the depths of his lungs. Moments passed and he found his calm.

"It'll be fine Jorry, come back down with us," Fenn assured him.

Jorry saw true compassion in Fenn's eyes, and even the others looked like they wanted him to step down. He offered a weak smile and then pushed away from the rock. The sensation of falling was thrilling and terrifying at once. He worked the prayer over in his mind, but the sickness in his stomach threatened to turn his insides out. Stone whistle by his head as he tumbled in the air, and he felt the wind pushing him toward the cliff face. Desperately, he stiffened his body at an angle, which

pulled him away from the stone, and he felt the sensation of flying. The mists below seemed to rush toward him. But he could feel his faith starting to lighten his body. He was not falling free anymore; he began to glide as the mists swallowed him.

The trees emerged as dark masses in the mist, and he bumped into several boughs as he tried to guide himself through the forest. A dense patch of mist obscured everything for a moment, but then he pulled out and was flying over the treetops. Light and exhilarated, Jorry rushed through the trees toward the temple.

Silver spires gleamed in the mist like candles, and the huge expanse of the monastery looked like a child's set of wood blocks as he neared it from above. Approaching the third story library offices, Jorry hovered outside the window where Brother Emppy, a jovial yet rotund man with graying hair, studied worn leather tomes at a long table. Jorry considered tapping on the glass pane but decided against it. First, he wanted to see the boys at the peak. Perhaps Halwin would be so surprised that he would fall off the edge.

The exhilaration of flying made Jorry forget the pain in his leg and the bite of the wind. The joy it brought was full. The freedom -- complete. Burrneedle and woortwood trees waved in the wind as he sailed toward the cliff's edge. He found himself following the leading edge of a pocket of mist to the base of the immense stone wall. As he was about to escalate to the top, something below caught his attention. Movement in the forest made him circle back around and settle in for a closer look. Shadows glided through the trees, converging in a small clearing near the trunk of a huge burrneedle. A cold spot in his stomach warned Jorry that they were ghosts. He wanted to race away from them, but curiosity froze him.

The shadows seemed to gather around something. Jorry hovered in, carefully keeping himself concealed within the upper branches of a woortwood tree. Still unable to see what they were doing, he flew a little closer. Then he saw it. On the needle-strewn ground was a broken body partially covered by a red robe. Sticking out from under the robe was a leg with a familiar, special left shoe.

The End

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must admit, the way he solved the Wumsiah abductions was more than clever. The city of Abyri is still talking about it, not to mention the parents of the lad and lass he rescued. He's made the legion sheriffs into heroes instead of foreign tax collectors. Jaylin Warnock isn't punctual, but he is every detail I described him to be. And a perfect match according to Prince Jevin's missive. The Espion is looking for a foreigner, not one Minyan born, and Jaylin is about as Atabyrion as..."

The nobleman held up his hand. "I'm here because you claimed these things about him, not because he's earned it yet through your praise. Let me judge for myself whether he would make a good Espion." He glanced around the small office and settled into a chair. "I'd like more details. His family is of the mercer's guild in Atabyrion, yet the lad takes no interest in it?"

"That is correct," Trillings answered, surreptitiously watching the door for Jaylin's arrival. "It caused quite a scandal when he chose to join the legion sheriffs instead of the guild. Business holds no interest for him." The nobleman's eyes widened, as if he'd been slapped. "He'd rather investigate," Trillings said. "Which, by Aster's grace, he is good at. Very good. He can coax confessions faster than a priest. His sense of humor, on the other hand, can be utterly irreverent."

"What of the girl you mentioned? The daughter of the other mercer family…what was their name? Are they still attached? Was the plight troth abandoned?"

"I think so. Her father has rejected the match so far because Jaylin refuses to advance himself… how shall I say this…appropriately? Aerona Worsutton is worth humbling himself for, but you know the Atabyrions. Their stubbornness comes from the goat milk, I think."

"What about his training? Has he studied under any of the highlander masters? Like Walraven or Cadsawan? Not Kulwinder Birk, I hope."

"No, he hasn't taken the time yet." Trillings winced. He wasn't really certain how important the weapons training would be to the Espion. Didn't they train all their own? "I…I don't think he desires to be a guardsman for one of the Marks in the Tier of Premye. But he did kill the man who tried abducting the lad and lass, if you remember. A Keeper no less, if you can identify the ring. When we pulled the man out of the cellar, we noticed he was at least a head taller than Jaylin."

"Yes, and how did he manage that? Show me the ring. It wasn't an Espion ring, I hope."

"No, I would have told you if it was one of ours. Where is that…ah, there we are." He took the silver ring and handed it over. "Do you recognize the symbol? I've never actually seen one of these before."

"Very few have, Trillings. If you get close enough to a Keeper, you're likely his target. Oh, this is definitely a Keeper's ring." He squinted to look at the repeating symbol around the band. The design was difficult to describe – two small circles, each with a pair of interlocking horns that pointed at each other.

"I've heard that even a trained Espion would struggle to kill one."

The nobleman nodded. "Killing a Keeper is beyond the abilities of a simple legion sheriff. Did he say how he managed it?"

Trillings rubbed his mouth. "This is what Jaylin told me. As the Keeper grabbed his throat, a feeling of…coldness went through him. Like he would die of a chill. He felt the ring on the man's thumb. He really didn't think – he took his dagger and cut the man's thumb off – nicked himself too."

"Amazing he's even alive. Dangerous folk they are. Do you know much about them?"

Trillings shook his head. "Never heard of one outside of Minya. Murderers, aren't they? The worst sort."

"The ring is the source of their great strength and the magic they use. It's on the thumb of the left hand for some reason. We don't know why. They cannot take the ring off, not without losing part of their hand." He shook his head. "It's curious one was here in Atabyrion. Perhaps they are trying to establish themselves outside Minya in another land here in the Quaylon. Amazing. I hope he realizes

that he is lucky to be alive."

A quick rap on the thick oak door announced a visitor. Trillings swallowed again, tugging at the neck cuff of his black uniform. The ribbed black vest was smothering at times, the wool surcoat nearly unbearable this close to summer. The nobleman rose and retreated to the far corner of the room. He nodded for Trillings to let the visitor come. "Enter," Trillings said. The nobleman's hand poised over the short sword. *Another sign of Minyan paranoia.* Trillings wanted to chuckle. *This is Abyri, by the Veil, not the docks in the Tier of Kira!* The Espion's face was impassive. Not even a smile or a wink of assurance. Casting a fervent prayer to Aster that he hadn't made a mistake, Trillings watched the door open.

Jaylin sauntered in. He was a good looking young man. Though not tall or broad across the shoulders like some butcher's lad, he was quick and fit and walked with an easiness and smirk that spoke volumes about his personality. His hair was coppery and long – very Atabyrion. He'd be unfashionable in Minya that way, but that wasn't Trillings problem. Jaylin greeted Trillings with a smile that was quick to inspire confidence. His honest blue eyes were engaging. Yet the smug look on his face was there for a reason. *Aster curse him, he knows what's about to happen.* Trillings gave him a firm stare.

"Jaylin Warnock, were you trapped in a privy stall all morning? I sent word for you before the second bells!"

Jaylin brushed the hair from his eyes and shrugged laconically. He glanced over his shoulder, appraising the Minyan nobleman, and then looked back at Trillings. "I can find my way out of a privy stall, sir. But it is not every day that one of the Prince's galleons docks in Abyri."

"And how did you know it was the Prince's galleon?"

Jaylin grinned. "It wasn't that difficult, sir. I ended up speaking with the Prince's steward… Kobus. He was in the market buying textiles and wine and was off to recruit some local watchmen to be part of the Prince's guard." He raised his eyebrows knowingly. "I was tempted to stay and chat with the man, thinking I might talk my way into a position with Prince Jevin, but since I had your orders to report, I promised I'd buy him a drink later." Jaylin turned and looked at the nobleman. "Or do I owe you a drink, my lord? I can twirl a pike and I'm fair enough with a curving-hilt saber."

"Easy does it, lad," Trillings said with a chuckle. "It's the height of bad manners to poach for a job in front of your master."

An amused smile crinkled the nobleman's expression. He pulled off a fitted leather glove and scratched the corner of his eyebrow. A glittering ring adorned his hand. An Espion ring. "I believe the words you chose were 'self-assured' and 'confident,' Captain. You'd have done better labeling it arrogance."

"If my presumption offends you, my lord," Jaylin said with a bow, "I apologize. An Atabyrion holds little value for rank or station. Minya is Atabyrion's benevolent brother in the Quaylon, not its master. I am pleased to meet you, Prince Jevin. I had heard you were younger."

"My name is Guyaume Reim Tousann," the nobleman replied. "But I do work for Prince Jevin and all the Tousann family. I came to Abyri to buy textiles, as you said, a little wine, and to recruit some sentries who know how to wield an Atabyrion highlander."

Jaylin's countenance sank. "A highlander? I thought Minyans use sabers." He nodded to the one Guyaume Reim wore at his waist.

"We do. But then, if I'd wanted that, I'd have stayed in the Tier of Premye and trained a new sentry myself. You do know how to wield a highlander? It's a heavy weapon, takes two hands. You look a little small for it though."

"I could learn," Jaylin said, his voice intense. He paused and thought a moment, considering.

Trillings knew he had figured it out already. Very little escaped those calm blue eyes. "But I have to wonder. Why would someone of your station come to Atabyrion to shop for cloth, squashed grapes, and servant soldiers? A steward could do those for the Prince. Your guardsmen at the least. No, my lord, I think you came here for something else."

Good work, lad, Trillings thought. *You just might earn it yet.*

"He is presumptuous," the nobleman murmured.

Jaylin ran his hand through his hair and gave him a level look. "I am. But am I also right?"

Trillings held his breath.

"Are you as good with a blade as you are with your mouth?"

Jaylin shook his head. "No, my lord. I'm much better with my mouth, as anyone here has probably told you. I'm an honest man, though my bluntness does get me into trouble now and then. I'm not the finest sentry who ever left Abyri. I've always preferred daggers actually, but they're illegal to carry, even for a legion sheriff. I only have two." He grinned disarmingly. "But I can learn just about anything if given a chance."

"Maybe I'll give you one," the nobleman replied. "I am head of the Espion, Jaylin. I'm assuming you're clever enough to have heard of us."

"I've been taught to defer to that ring." He nodded to the one on the Espion's hand. "It's a green emerald on a silver band. If you twist the gem, the stone goes white."

The nobleman nodded, satisfied. "Well, we might be able to use someone like you. Maybe not. I think I'd like to borrow this young man for a few weeks, Captain Trillings. Will you let him go?"

Jaylin gave Trillings an imploring look. The legion sheriff captain covered his mouth and leaned back, sighing awkwardly. "I don't know, my lord. There is so much to do around here…the celebration of Advent always has trouble lingering for days afterwards. I don't know if I can afford to lose him right now."

"*Captain!"* Jaylin said, his voice rising with emotion.

"You did say you wanted to make a pilgrimage to the Temple of Aster though," Trillings said. "I suppose I can let you go for that long." He gave the young man a wink. "Don't disappoint me."

The head of the Espion rubbed his jaw. "An Atabyrion pilgrim. What a contradiction. They bow to no one. You do believe in Aster beyond the Veil, don't you, Jaylin?"

"Yes, and may you find rest in his holy Quintessence," Jaylin said with a meek voice, making the sign of the god. "We are of the same religion, my lord. The god takes his tithes in Minyan silver after all." He studied the nobleman. "If I come with you, how do I prove myself worthy of the Prince? Do I get to scrub his floors and fawn and grovel? Or do I have to work up to that?"

Trillings shook his head. "By the Veil, Jaylin, this is the Prince's own uncle! Show a little more respect!"

Guyaume Reim held up his hand. "Oh, I'm not offended, Captain. I've met many Atabyrions before this one." He smiled approvingly. "Jevin has a similar self-mocking sense of humor. I think he will enjoy meeting you, Jaylin. Why don't you judge him for yourself?" He paused, stroking his gray-flecked goatee and then clucked his tongue. "He's entirely too handsome though, Trillings. Likely to attract attention to himself and break a heart here if he leaves." From a small pouch, he withdrew a silver ring with a small, blue, star-sapphire stone. "The Prince asked me to give this to you. It's a farewell gift or a promise ring...to any maiden you might be leaving behind."

Jaylin took the ring and examined it. "So you know about her," he said, his voice soft and thoughtful. The two stared at each other for a moment. Jaylin finally smirked. "This must be worth fifty silver dyx. It's beautiful." He gave Trillings a sidelong look, his blue eyes scrutinizing him as well. "I'm not bound to any plight troth, my lord. I'm not sure what you've been told."

"I am aware of that," the nobleman replied. "Do with it what you will, Jaylin. It's a gift from the Prince."

"A most generous one. Thank you, my lord. How soon do you intend to leave Abyri?"

The nobleman gave him a pointed look. "You should think about this opportunity before deciding. If you wish to celebrate Advent here tonight, I understand. But on the morrow we'll sail without you."

"Quite an opportunity, my lord. It's not every day that a legion sheriff is invited to sail with the Head of the Espion." Jaylin turned the ring over slowly in his hand. "Tell the Prince's steward I still owe him a drink."

"Well enough, Jaylin. Go ponder your decision, then," Trillings said, dismissing him with a wave. "But you'd better not be late in making it."

Jaylin bowed with an exaggerating flourish. He started for the door and then stopped. "Why would Prince Jevin want an Atabyrion?"

The nobleman smiled. "The Prince has his reasons, of course."

After the door shut, Trillings drummed his fingers along the desk. He raised his eyebrows. "Well? What do you think? He's young, but he has the eyes of a thief and mind of a Minyan lawyer. That was a rather expensive gift you gave him."

"It wasn't a gift," the Espion replied. "It was a test."

* * *

Throughout his life, Jaylin Warnock had spent as much time dwelling on the prospect of marriage as he did pondering the deeper meanings of the Minyan religion. Precious little. He sat on the sloping shingled roof of the Highwater Inn, feeling the grain of the wood comfortably beneath him. From his perch on the roof, he saw half of Abyri, both the docks to the north and the green hills and distant peaks opening beyond the ridged walls. It was a favorite spot of his, a place of solitude where he could think without interruptions. Except for the pigeons, of course.

He flipped the ring over in his hand, juggling it. It was possible he might have dropped it and lost it down a wash drain or to one of the many peddlers passing beneath the roof, but he had excellent reflexes and he kept flipping it, again and again. He paused, studying the bright blue gemstone crowned on the heavy silver band. It was a gorgeous ring and cut for a woman's hand.

But was Aerona really worth such a promise? Oh, she was beautiful, no mistaking that. But she expected him to act like a doting husband, and Jaylin couldn't exactly stomach the idea. He knew she was a good match, by any stretch of Atabyrion standards. She was graceful, charming, had fashionably blonde hair – a likeness the townsfolk compared to the fabled Etayne of the Atabyrion book of legends. Her father was wealthy enough to tempt one of the lesser Marks in the City of Minya. But the two mercer families thought an alliance would suit their interests better. The Warnocks and the Worsuttons. *What would that make our children?* he thought lazily. *The Nocksuttons?* That had an ominous sound to it. He wondered what Aerona would say if he presented her with the ring.

"My dear lady," he said gallantly, knowing that no one could hear him up on the roof. "I may be mean and low, but I have an opportunity to serve Prince Jevin of Minya. I know not when I may return, but I beg of you to wear this as a token of my…" A grin twitched on his mouth. He'd never be able to do it with a straight face.

He chuckled and stared at the ring again and tried it on each of his fingers. It fit snugly around his smallest finger. A thought struck him. Would the Prince really want him to be sworn to a woman

back in Atabyrion? Fussing a fretting about her health and feelings? Not that Jaylin would ever do that.

The sun was slinking lower against the green hills. He swiped his hand through his hair, feeling the fading warmth on his face. The Advent of Summer. He couldn't believe it was here again. Not only was it the major religious holiday of the year to everyone in the Quaylon. Summer meant the heaviest trading season as well, promising an effusion of silver. Would Aerona even miss seeing him? She would do what her father wanted, of course. What choice did she really have? Thinking back, their conversations had always been stilted. So one-sided. She lacked imagination and ambition. In the end, she'd be happier wed to a Mark.

After rising from the perch, he crouched low and swung over the lip of the roof back into his room. Well, at least he was honest with himself. He had only packed a few things, enough to survive on his own. Scooping up his purse and belt, he fastened his doublet and tugged on the walking boots. He'd been on his own for a while. Why bother telling anyone? Thoughts and worries started to crowd in his mind, but he shoved them down firmly. He never let worry get the better of him.

Leaving the Highwater Inn, he jogged all the way back to the legion garrison. He dodged street carts and gray pigeons poking along the streets. The speckled cobbles were thick with grit. Seeing the sun sink over the rooftops, he hurried faster, weaving past two drunken sailors and a beggared weaponmaster. A pigeon cooed with anger, flapping its wings as Jaylin nearly trampled it. Aisles of buildings and shops arranged in zigzagging patterns scattered away from the docks. He wondered what the streets of Minya were like, whether they had bakeries selling eel pies and flasks of red wine. Or didn't the Minyans drink mead? He'd heard that somewhere. Trillings, probably.

Entering the garrison, he hurried up the stairs and burst into the captain's office.

"Jaylin? Lad, is everything all right?"

Jaylin lurched against the desk, catching his breath. "I'm going. I just…wanted to thank you, before I left." He mopped the sweat from his face with a sleeve. "Thank you, sir. For recommending me to the Espion."

For a moment, the captain hesitated. "Don't think on it too much, lad. It's self-serving, I assure you." His voice hinted of a growl, yet his eyes were pleased. His long dark hair had specks of gray in it. He had been a fair captain, a good man, despite his inferior Minyan blood. "I doubt you've told your father yet…probably just as well." He chuckled. "Your parents don't need to know about the Espion. They'll have enough worries as it is. Did you talk to Worsutton?"

"Sweet Aster, no!" Jaylin shook his head. "You know how well Worsutton would take something like that. Might as well soil on his favorite leather boots and claim the cat did it."

"You still have the ring," Trillings mentioned, nodding toward Jaylin's hand.

"Nothing is certain. Nothing in Minya is anyway. If the Prince doesn't accept me, I may be back here to bother you. Why give her an empty promise? One I'm not sure I can keep. She shouldn't have to wait out her days for me. It could take months to establish myself in Minya."

"Years, Jaylin," Trillings said. "I wish I were stationed in the City of Minya instead of Abyri." He chuckled. "Who wouldn't want to work near the Sovereign of Minya? To be an emissary of the King's Will? I am trusted to give reports and that is all. Being a legion sheriff is better than groveling to a Mark as a guardsman if you ask me." He tapped his fingers on the desk. "You are bright, Jaylin, and I think you'll do well. Jevin is wise and as clever as any Atabyrion. He is very different than his uncle. If I know him at all, I think he'll take you in. That's why I sent the message."

"Sounds like a rare man," Jaylin said, grinning. "A Minyan who's clever. I wasn't jesting though, Captain. I'll not forget that you recommended me."

"Bloody Aster, you'd better not! Besides, if I passed this chance of getting rid of you, I don't

know when the opportunity would come again." He smiled. "Here though, before you go." He withdrew a sheaf of parchment, sealed with wax and the imprint of his signet ring. "I didn't want to give this to you in front of Guyaume Reim. If you ever need help from the legion sheriffs in Minya, take this to Captain Carshalton at the Steene. Remember his name."

"Carshalton," Jaylin repeated.

"Yes, he's an officer in the Steene and a friend of mine. If you work hard, Jaylin, maybe you will become an Espion. There's no greater honor. At least not for lowborn men like us."

Jaylin smiled and winked. "To us in Atabyrion, all Minyans are lowborn. Well, Captain, I may get to lead the Espion some day. I've got to keep my goals high." Trillings burst out laughing and Jaylin's smirk stretched to a broad grin. "If that happens, then you'll be working for me. Remember that." Giving a smart salute, he left Trillings and hurried to the docks.

* * *

The Prince's galleon dwarfed most of the others docked at the pier. The docks weren't crowded that night – unusual for a port city, but the revelry was just beginning in the city square. Sail webbing creaked as sailors scampered to tighten the upper ropes. Jaylin stood at the foot of a notched gangplank resting on the docks. A sentry waited at the plank nest wearing a uniform with the green dragon on a black field, watching him.

"I'm Jaylin of Atabyrion," Jaylin said. "Is Lord Guyaume on board? Or is he in the city with the revelers?"

"In the city?" Guyaume Reim said, emerging from around the sidewall. He glanced down the plank at Jaylin, a bemused smirk on his face. "I don't mean to startle you, lad, but the thrill of watching the oil boats on Advent in a port city like Abyri is hardly a compelling reason to linger any longer than we have to.'

"I'd heard the Minyans use oil boats too, only you drop them into the river," Jaylin answered. "What a nasty display of gluttony and waste. Many folk here don't have enough oil to light their lamps for a year. Yet they'll all be wasting precious spoonfuls tonight. There are other similarities as well. I mean, what would be more interesting than getting drunk and brawling? I've heard the riots of Minya are quite a sight to see. They kill more in three days than those who die of old bones here in a generation."

"If you're so anxious to riot, then come aboard, Jaylin." Guyaume turned and whistled for a sailor. "Find Kobus and tell him to bring the Atabyrions back. We're sailing tonight." Jaylin nodded and joined him on the gangway. "Your quarters will be on the upper deck," Guyaume explained. "We'll have much to discuss on the journey. Stow your things."

Jaylin followed a sailor to the main row of cabins on the upper deck and quickly stuffed his sack in a nailed-down chest. He tested the hammock netting and then went back above board to watch the revelers returning from Abyri. Climbing the steps to the helmsman's deck, he pulled himself up on the rail and sidled up against the curve of the ship. Staring out at the lights of the city, he listened to the pipes and tabors playing shrill, pleasant tunes from the center square. He would definitely miss the haunting tunes of Atabyrion. Jaylin had been on fishing boats and even a banyan cog, but the galleon rose up like a castle. Cheers and laughter drifted by on the wind and the galleon swayed as he watched the Atabyrion recruits plod up the gangplank, followed by sailors hefting huge barrels and pallets. Guyaume directed their movement and actions like a general commanding an army.

The Espion – the Minyan network of spies. The day had ended quite differently than it had

dawned. That morning, he was a legion sheriff too clever for Abyri. Now he wondered if the Espion would be more dream than daylight fact. If half of what he had heard over his life were true, the City of Minya would swallow him like a huge fish. Or maybe it would give him the challenge he'd always been hoping for. To serve something he could respect. Very little in Abyri fostered that feeling. He might mock Minya out loud, as all Atabyrions did, but Abyri would never rise to the prominence that Minya had. As he got to know her, he knew he would either love Minya – or hate her.

One day, he thought, looking at the sapphire flashing on his finger. He twisted the ring slowly, watching the helm lanterns wink in and out of the grooves on the silver band. One day he hoped to wear an Espion ring.

Assuming, of course, that he learned to love the City.

* * *

A warm wool mantle hung across Jaylin's shoulders as he leaned against the ship rail and watched the dawn rise over a slate gray ocean. Seabirds squawked, looping high and landing on the thick rigging poles. He breathed in the briny flavor of wood and waves. As the yellow sun rose over the waters, he saw looming peaks in the distance. Minya was really much nearer than he had always imagined.

"Are you always up this early, lad?" Kobus asked, scrubbing his hands together for warmth. He joined Jaylin on the prow. Jaylin looked back, feeling the salt-sharp wind on his face and wondered how tousled and unkempt his hair must look.

"I'm watching for the City, Kobus. I can't wait to get a look at her."

"Oh, you'll see her dirty linens soon enough," he answered with the hint of mockery in his voice. Obviously he hadn't been fed stories of Minya's majesty all his life. "Lord Guyaume would like you to join him."

Jaylin nodded and followed, feeling his legs wobble as he hit the floor planks. Gripping the side rail firmly, he went down the aisle to the quarterdeck. Sidestepping sailors and ship officers, they approached the Espion's chamber in the rear. Kobus rapped on the door and opened it when he heard Guyaume's voice bid them enter.

"Ah, Jaylin, I'm glad I didn't have to wake you. You should really consider cutting your hair. It won't whip about you like that."

Jaylin smiled but didn't answer. He couldn't understand the Minyan fascination with naked necks.

"You may go, Kobus. Have a stool. You look a little greensick." Jaylin thanked him and took a seat. He watched the mead in Guyaume's cup slosh against the rim and quickly looked up, forcing his eyes to meet the Espion's. "I saw last night that you kept the ring."

Jaylin looked down at his hand. "What would have happened if I had given it to her?"

Guyaume smiled. "You would have been turned away from the Espion of course. And why would that have happened?"

"You encouraged me to give the ring to the girl to test where my loyalties were. To a girl back home or to the Espion. Do I have to give it back now?"

"No, lad, it's yours. It is not an Espion ring, but the promise of one if you use your wits like you just did. Now, I also wanted to speak to you about what you'll be doing when we reach the City. If you have any desire," he paused, chewing a slice of glazed trint, "…to make a pilgrimage to the Tier of Aster, you'd better do it soon. Once you start work for the Espion, you will only visit there during the yearly sessions when the King's Will meets on the Isle."

"What do you mean? The Espion cannot enter the Tier of Aster?"

"Exactly." He set the knife down and dabbed his mouth with the edge of a napkin. "Let me explain, for it's a complicated matter. The City is divided into six portions, each one a separate Tier. Several of Minya's past Sovereigns granted the Tier of Aster the privileges of sanctuary. What that means is Minyan law expires within that Tier. Only the rules of the Deconeus apply there, so it's created no small dilemma over the years. Let me just say that it flaunts these privileges now."

"If it's immune to the edicts of the King's Will, then I imagine it has."

"You see, it created a den of outlaws who cannot be punished by the legion sheriffs or officers of the King's Will." His expression iced over with contempt, and he chewed on the trint vigorously. "Bloody thieves and murderers – the dross of the City – they leave the Tier of Aster, commit their crimes in the other Tiers, and then steal back where they cannot be punished." He shook his head. "Like the Keepers. It's abhorrent what they do with Aster's sanction. What they do under the guise of the church."

Jaylin agreed. "Sounds rather one-sided. What happens while they are inside the Tier?"

"The Deconeus of Aster is very strict, and those fool enough to violate his laws forfeit their lives. I hear he employs a half-dozen headsmen. But he does not rein in the criminals who live there, either. The legion sheriffs petition the King's Will to remove those outlaws by force, but the Deconeus maintains the Tier's tradition of protection. Interesting contentions, I assure you."

"And so the Deconeus forbids the Espion to enter," Jaylin said, considering it. "And how does he enforce that?"

"If we knew that," Guyaume replied with a cunning smile, "We'd have Espion safehouses there, wouldn't we? Somehow he ferrets out our men, one by one, with his chosen priests. The most devout ones are called Nasturtium. I've lost a good many men and women over the years to the headsmen of Aster. I'm just warning you in advance about straying too close. Nearly every new Espion is tempted by the challenge and requests an assignment there. For their own protection, we forbid it." He wiped his mouth on a napkin again.

Jaylin nodded. "Thank you. I've always thought my head looked better on my shoulders than it would in a basket. This wouldn't be your Espion test, would it? Telling me not to go there but expecting me to anyway?" He watched carefully to see if Guyaume Reim's answer was a lie.

"By the Veil, no! I like the way you think, lad – a very clever conclusion. But that's not it." From what Jaylin could judge, he was telling the truth. "And in the Espion, we do not call it a 'test'. It is called the Measure. It is a specific assignment – like infiltrating the Mark of Asilomar's household and finding out if he has a mistress. A task that involves acquiring information we already know the answer to. That way, we know if you can succeed. Believe me, they are very difficult and vary depending on the nature of your future assignment with us."

"And what will happen when we reach the Prince, my lord?"

"He will speak with you, of course. He trusts my judgment, but he likes to get to know everyone who serves him." He rubbed crumbs from his goatee. "I'm a little disappointed in your weapons training, so we'll probably start you there first."

He raised the knife and sliced into a spotted pear. "There are skills that will be helpful before taking the Measure." He smiled shrewdly. "Your eyebrows twitched when I first mentioned it. Being an Espion and wearing the ring makes you immune to Minyan law. Trust like that doesn't come easily. If you were killed on your first assignment, what would happen to the ring? No, you must earn one. So, we test your knowledge of the City, your training, your investigative talents. If you pass the Measure, you will be given a ring and assigned to an Espion post in one of the five other Tiers. I am the head of the Espion in the Tier of Premye, and all other heads report to myself and the Prince."

Jaylin's stomach roiled with the rocking motion of the ship and his nerves. "That puts me at a disadvantage," he said. "Being an Atabyrion."

"But in a different light, your heritage could also work to your advantage."

Jaylin nodded. "I share your religion but not necessarily all of your ideals and ways of thinking. So, tell me more about Prince Jevin."

"Very well," Guyaume replied, after taking another sip from his goblet. "As a Prince of House Tousann, he is the highest ranking noble next to the Sovereign. You did know Jevin is the Sovereign's brother, correct? Good. As the king's brother, he runs the sessions of the King's Will. In addition to that, he officially handles the affairs of the Espion, and he was appointed battle commander of the City three years ago."

"What then does the Sovereign do?" Jaylin asked incredulously. "He must trust his brother a great deal to give him so much power. In Atabyrion we have a saying, 'Better to be a younger brother – many a fool are born too quickly.' It happens to be my brother Quentin's favorite quote."

"Ah, then the Atabyrions must also believe in the Minyan proverb, 'Jealousy and envy are twin brothers.' The Prince and the Sovereign do not fully agree on every measure, naturally, but they do indeed love each other well. I've heard them bicker, but only because they are Tousanns. Davin-Noll has lapses of…how can I put this delicately…judgment, and Jevin is often called upon to resolve the consequences of them. The edicts of the King's Will must be carried out. If that were to stop, Minya would no longer dominate the Quaylon."

A shout from without drew their attention as the lookout announced the sighting of the City. Jaylin's eyes lit up with excitement and Guyaume nodded.

"Come, lad. You don't look very hungry, and we can always eat after we've docked. Let me show you our humble City." He smiled like a wolf.

* * *

The Prince's galleon churned closer to the Minyan shore. Framed with high mountains and white-capped peaks, the City of Minya rose from the shoreline like a huge shattered mirror, glittering with shards of light and silver. Certain parts reminded Jaylin of a fist gripping a rusted torch, smoking and sputtering fire. It was the only way to describe it – layer after layer of stone and metal and smoke.

Jaylin glanced over at Guyaume Reim. It was a little frightening to think how close Minya was by sea to Atabyrion. They had been sailing all night and the sun was still lazy in the skies. How long before he would meet this enigmatic Prince? He wanted to learn as much as he could about Jevin before meeting the man.

"Impressed?" the nobleman asked, giving Jaylin a mocking smile.

"It's a hair larger than Abyri, but what's all the fuss?" Jaylin said in return. He was amazed at the size of the city, but he did not like showing his amazement to anyone – unless he couldn't help it. "Now tell me more about Jevin's house, the Tousanns. They haven't always been the ruling house. Not many years ago there was another. The last Sovereign came from the House of…"

"Alvaron," the Espion answered. "But they ruled before you were born. House Tousann rules now. Davin-Noll is the second king of the line. The House Tousann was the ranking Mark of Premye before overthrowing the previous Sovereign. And there is rarely a year without dissension." He smirked. "Three years ago, Jevin led the Sovereign's army against the Gypsy Kings of the Tier of Kyra." He sighed. "It's called the Tier of the Infidel now." He directed Jaylin's view to the west side of the City. "That is West Dock. You see the squalor, the misfit ships? The Tier of the Infidel, not the Tier

of Minya. That's where gypsies sell their souls to the vices of mystaqua and sour wine. Those who refuse to know Aster live there. They will not leave, but they cannot truly be part of the City."

As they passed around the view of the docks, a huge island lunged out of the sea, crowned with a citadel with high arching buttresses. It was an enormous structure, at least a dozen times larger than the biggest church in Abyri. A bridge stretched from the thick, gray-stone walls and joined the island to the land.

"By the Veil," Jaylin whispered, "What is that? It looks like a church, but…" He could hardly speak. A huge manor house was on the east side of the enormous structure. The roof was gilded in silver, making it shimmer with white light as the sun dazzled on its mirrored edge.

"That is the Temple of Aster," Guyaume said proudly. "It's as strong as any fortress. The island dips on the other side and there's a docking pier, for the Deconeus' use. Aside from that, it can only be reached by two bridges. You can't see it from here." He shook his head. "See the walls across from the Isle? Those are the walls of the Tier of Aster. Thousands flock there every day, making their yearly pilgrimages to the god. Aster does not ask for much more devotion than that. He prefers silver dyx, though they must bear his mint. The Temple, of course, is the Deconeus' home, as are the other churches within the City. As I told you, those churches are the only places in Minya where the King's Will does not rule. If a man commits a crime, he can flee to one of the churches and plead for sanctuary. He must swear an oath of obedience to the church, but it's more merciful than getting branded and tossed into the sewers. If this happens in a church outside the Tier of Aster, the Deconeus will then send a few Nasturtium to escort the criminal safely to the Tier of Aster. But the mercy comes with a price. Many of the criminals are…shall we say, unrepentant."

The cityscape was split by a wide river. A huge stone dam blocked the head of it, so imposing it looked like the side of a sheared mountain. A pair of enormous bridges loaded down with three-story buildings joined the eastern and western sides. It was like staring into the teeth of a giant. The enormity of the City amazed Jaylin. It would take months to visit every street, to make sense of the jumble of walls and patchwork maze of streets.

"That's the Semn," Guyaume said, pointing to the river. "And behind it is Konen Dam. Over there, at the shore where the river hits the ocean, see that fortress? That's the Steene. It's the citadel of the legion sheriff commanders. It is also a prison, but only for nobles of the sword. It's impossible to swim, for the river currents are too fierce. The Espion has several connections there, naturally."

As they advanced to the docks, huge beams and cranes hoisted and pulled the cargo nets from aboard massive galleons, hefting the goods and setting them onto carts and wagons. The Tier of Minya stretched as far as Jaylin could see, until the land curved around out of sight. The ground was uneven with hills that rose higher and higher until they met the heights of the Dam. The lowest tier was crammed with warehouses, alehouses, and inns. Four and five story buildings, some six, lurched against each other, no space between them. Sailors, dockworkers, and merchants swarmed like ants – he'd never seen so many people in one place, not even during Advent.

"Once we disembark, stay near me," Guyaume advised. "It is easy to get lost, can you believe it? And there are cutthroats here that would just as soon kill an Atabyrion as look at one." He gave Jaylin a sidelong glance. "You may want to cut your hair."

Jaylin nodded, still staring at the City.

"That's the Tier of Premye," Guyaume said, pointing toward the swath of trees and manor houses and castles near the summit of the plateaus. "There are twenty-eight Marks of Premye, each with a manor house and retainers. Prince Jevin's estate is too far to see; it's near Rad-Nym. But look there, higher than Konen Dam. That's Shallic Palace."

"It's bigger than the temple!" Jaylin gasped in disbelief. He did not bother containing his

shock.

The palace rose above the trees and gardens, its roofs sloping and gilded. It rivaled the mountain peaks behind it. Minya was larger than anything he had imagined. The town of Abyri was just a pebble in the current of a mighty river. Minya ruled it all. Of course, if the history lessons were true, the city had inhabited the estuary for more than a thousand years, growing, twisting, re-shaping itself. He was excited and nervous at the same time. The more he looked, the more there was to see.

The ship approached the docking moors, and about thirty seamen on the pier held out staves to help hook the mooring lines and hawsers. Guyaume Reim's eyes narrowed as he stared at the docks.

"Kobus, are those sheriffs?"

The steward leaned over the gunwale. "They are, my lord. Looks like they're waiting to board us!"

"Bloody Aster," the Espion swore, gazing steadily at the pier. "How did she..? She couldn't have known." He swung back, giving Jaylin a hard stare. "Kobus, get him a tunic. Quickly now, lad! Put it on!"

"Throw down a gangplank!" a voice boomed from below. "If anyone interferes, use the crossbows."

The sailors hurriedly abandoned their positions. Kobus tossed Jaylin a new tunic with the emblem of Jevin's dragon on it. He quickly tugged it on and tucked it below his belt, arranging himself quickly. A gangplank from the dock bit into the groove of the galleon. The soldiers started up. Fear flickered awake inside him at seeing Guyaume's reaction, but excitement as well. Why would a nobleman be worried about legion sheriffs? It made no sense.

"By the Veil, she's got the legion sheriffs on her side now," Guyaume cursed, motioning for Jaylin to back away from the side. He turned and motioned to two other men whom Jaylin had barely seen before. As one, the three of them drew short swords from beneath their cloaks.

The gangplank rattled. Guyaume turned to Jaylin. "I don't have time to explain, lad. Stand by the others. Do not let her see your eyes. Do not answer her. Not a word, I tell you." He turned to the two others with matching blades, who Jaylin realized were Espion. His voice pitched low in warning to them. "She's deadlier than a widow spider and fast as a snake – follow my lead. She could kill us all."

Jaylin swallowed and took a hesitant step backwards.

CHAPTER TWO
House Tousann Docks, Tier of Minya

As the shuffle of heavy boots thumped up the gangplank, Jaylin felt a nervous flutter inside his chest. He stepped in line with the others from Atabyrion. This was the Prince's ship. Weren't the legion sheriffs supposed to defer to the Espion? He risked a glance up at the captain as he crossed the port side of the galleon. Guyaume Reim stood between them and the Atabyrions, fidgeting with the fringe of his mantle. His jaw was tight with anger.

"Stand stiff and keep your eyes on the floor," Kobus warned in a low voice, passing before the ranks. He had a protective look in his eyes. "Not a word, any of you."

Jaylin watched the sheriffs board the ship out of the corner of his eye. Guyaume approached the gangplank in a few quick strides. The dark-clad sheriffs strode up with arrogance, holding their truncheons and threatening the sailors on board with their hard looks. A few had crossbows leveled at the crew. Some of the sailors cowered while others seemed to be chafing for a fight.

"I am Guyaume Reim, Head of the Espion – have your men stand down and…"

"Stand aside," the captain said, stepping past him and scanning the seven Atabyrions in line. He looked to the left and to the right of the deck, surveying the crew. Then he turned around and faced Guyaume Reim. "I've never had the pleasure of meeting you, Lord Reim. But I have orders to search this ship for mystaqua. By order of the King's Will."

"You are accusing Prince Jevin of being engaged in the mystaqua trade?" Guyaume's voice was full of outrage. "Captain, I am a noble of the sword, with the authority of the King's Will fully behind me, if you think that this accusation..."

"I'm not implying the Prince is involved," the captain said, cutting him off. "But the Prince's subjects have their own wills, and many of the Espion abuse their privileges in regards to the King's Will."

Guyaume's smile turned all ice. "Are you prepared to say that at Shallic Palace before all the noble Marks of the Tier of Premye, Captain? Your career with the legion sheriffs is finished."

A woman's voice cut through the tension. "Patience, Guyaume, we won't be here long." A woman in blue and silver joined them on the gangway. "At least not long enough for any more of your Espion to reach us. Save your temper and your fears. I'm not here to kill you and start a riot in the City again. I merely wanted you to remember that I watch you. Still."

The woman was small, fragile-looking, but her demeanor made Guyaume coil with rage. Jaylin caught a glimpse of her and could not look away. He realized in that moment that even Aerona Worsutton was only a dandelion. The woman who had boarded the ship was a rose. Her hair was white-gold like the sun. Her eyes reminded him of shade and snow – gray with flecks of white. She wore jewels from her ears, throat, and wrists, and they jingled softly as she walked, a loose confident stride. He had a difficult time with her age. She was easily in her early thirties, her face young, her eyes much older. The silver gown she wore beneath a plain blue mantle was exquisite with rich lacing and sewn gemstones. Her features would have made any Atabyrion tremble, for she was the epitome

of his peoples' standard of beauty. He heard one of the men next to him gasp.

"My lady," the sheriff captain said, bowing slightly. Deferentially. There was fear in Guyaume's eyes. He knew her. But he did nothing. The two Espion near him looked ready to attack her.

"Search the ship, Captain," she said. "They brought something back from Atabyrion. I want to know what." The legion sheriffs commenced their search of the galleon. Their uniforms were nearly the same as they wore in Atabyrion – a black tunic with a knotted silver pattern on the fringe fitting loose over a bulky hauberk. There was no mistaking a legion sheriff for a merchant or a guildsman. Some stood guard on deck with crossbows while the others sheathed the truncheons in belt hoops and went below. Knives were forbidden in Minya, of course, but a good truncheon dropped a man quickly enough. Jaylin kept the woman in his side vision. She strolled toward them.

Guyaume stood near the gangplank, fidgeting with his jeweled ring. "You are breaking the truce," he said with a tight voice. "When I get back to Premye..."

"*I'm* breaking the truce? Save your blustering for Jevin. You thought slipping away before Advent would hide your movements. You were wrong. Again. Now tell your *children* to sheathe their swords. I taught their fathers."

Jaylin kept his eyes focused on his boots, but he saw the exchange very well as Guyaume made a hand signal and the Espion put away their weapons. The mysterious woman turned and looked at each of the Atabyrions at attention before Kobus. Jaylin noticed that she paused when she saw him. He clenched his jaw and kept his gaze down.

The woman looked down at the ring on his hand and then cocked her head quizzically, the hint of a smile on her mouth.

The ring!

"I think…I found what I was looking for," she said in a soft voice to Jaylin. "Haven't I?"

A bead of sweat dripped down the side of Jaylin's face. She stepped forward, looking at the ring on his finger. She took his hand to study it. Her touch was warm, almost a caress.

The captain of the sheriffs followed her look and then stood closer. His breath reeked of onions and mutton. "And how much did you pay the Atabyrion sheepherder for this fine animal, Lord Reim? Three dyx? Four?"

Guyaume ignored the taunt. Jaylin bristled at the man's discourtesy. He loathed sheriffs who abused their rank by mocking others beneath them. He was thankful that Trillings had always been wary of that sort.

The woman tried to meet Jaylin's eyes. "No, you are not like these lambs," she whispered in his ear, just loud and firm enough that her breath tickled him. Her fingers played with the ends of his coppery brown hair. "But don't commit your soul to Jevin so quickly. There are others in power in Minya, you know. Other opportunities to serve." Her fingers pinched several locks of his hair and tugged at him. "Come, my young Atabyrion. This is my City. I will take you in."

The captain of the legion sheriffs smirked and folded his arms. "He's only a stripling, Lady Minya. Not worth a sack stuffed with bad potatoes."

"He's young, but I could teach him. Look how still he stands. The control." Her voice dropped for his ears alone. "Don't waste yourself with the Espion. I know your people, boy. The Espion can only promise you death."

Without raising his eyes, Jaylin swallowed and spoke. "If you'll forgive my ignorance, my lady, but I don't know who you are. Only that I have agreed to serve the King's Will." He lifted his gaze subtly, enough to see her mouth. She had a smile he would remember, revealing clean white teeth and soft lips. She was beautiful, but it was a cold shade of beauty. It frightened him how that smile made him feel, and he turned that fear into resolve. Clenching his fist, he felt the ring bite into

his skin. He focused his mind on Aerona's face.

"Good enough," she said as if declaring a victory. "If you would truly serve the King's Will, then you will serve me. Bring him with us, Captain." She turned to go.

"By the Veil..." Guyaume muttered, but he did not move to interfere.

"No," Jaylin replied, taking a short step backward and holding up his hand. "I wasn't bought, so I can't be sold." He was angry, but he kept his voice calm. "I don't care who you are or whether this City is yours or not. I'm Atabyrion. That means I'm freeborn. I'm not Minyan, and I choose who I serve."

The legion sheriff's fist clubbed into Jaylin's stomach, knocking the wind from him. He dropped to his knees, wincing with pain, but he didn't cry out. He could hardly breathe. Biting his lip, he waited for another blow and steeled himself to receive it, but the woman interceded.

"No, let him alone," she said, sinking down next to Jaylin. Her skirts rustled against the planks. "You Atabyrions were never timid." Her fingers caressed his hair one more time. "Join me when you're ready then," she whispered and rose.

"Get off my galleon," Guyaume said, his voice full of acid. "He doesn't want to go with you, and he bloody well isn't!"

"You expect me to obey you now?" she said with a scornful laugh. "Come, Captain. Poor Lord Reim is fidgeting like a youngling. I found what I came to find." The lady of Minya stopped by the gangplank and looked at them all. "Tell Jevin he'll need to be more subtle next time. You weren't in Atabyrion buying sheep or linens, Guyaume. As you see, I still know everything you do."

Guyaume's fists tightened, and he shook with fury. "You know less than you pretend. You always have."

"If that were true," she said. "You'd be dead."

The legion sheriff captain whistled and the others rose from below deck and shuffled down the gangplank with the woman closed in their midst. Jaylin watched her go and wiped the sweat from his mouth. For an instant, he wanted nothing more than to follow her off the ship, just to see what would happen. But the smarting pain in his ribs reminded him why he didn't. No, he could never serve someone like her.

Guyaume planted his hands on his hips. He was trembling with rage as he turned on Jaylin. "By the Veil, what were you thinking speaking to her like that?" He turned and watched the small company disappear into the crowded dock. "Aster curse her. By the bleeding Veil, curse her!"

Jaylin watched her leave and listened to the Guyaume's blistering oaths.

"We could have taken her, my lord," another Espion said. "There were enough of us. She was close enough to me, I could have…"

"We'd all have died," Guyaume said. "Every one of us along with these poor Atabyrion fools who will likely never see or hear of her again." His face seemed to age. "I know whereof I speak, young man. I've seen her kill."

So she used to be an Espion. Pressing his stomach, Jaylin leveled his gaze at Guyaume Reim as the nobleman got control of his anger. "Well, my lord, you could have warned me about her before we docked. You took time enough to mention the Deconeus of Aster and his rights. Now who was she and why does she hate Prince Jevin so?" He shook his head in disbelief. "Was that the Queen of Minya?"

Guyaume motioned for Kobus. "Half the Tier of Premye doesn't even know she exists," he snapped. "She considers you a threat if she came to meet you in person." He turned to Kobus. "Unload the hold and take the others to Jevin's manor. Master Jaylin and I need to talk." He shook his head and swore under his breath. "I will answer you, lad, but not here. Let's find a ditch alley tavern

where we can speak privately. Take off the tunic."

Guyaume stepped up on the gangplank and went down. Cautious, but intrigued, Jaylin grabbed his sack and followed, leaving the tunic behind. The sea sloshed against the tall dock posts. His legs began to tremble, both from the rocking motion of the sea and the throbbing pain in his stomach. Black and green scum stained the waters. The air was heavy and putrid from the smell of gull-pecked fish bobbing nearby. Jaylin closed his eyes and was promptly sick overboard.

* * *

The tavern-inn past the wharf was called the Shore Trove. Crowds of dockmen and merchants jammed the place, gobbling fish pies and gravy drippings and drinking from large clay mugs. It had taken nearly an hour to walk there, even though it was close to the docks. Guyaume showed the Espion ring to the innkeeper, who then brought them to a private booth in the far corner. The fetid summer heat made the nobleman's face drip with sweat. Jaylin felt his own clothes sticking to him.

"This is the Tier of Minya, correct?" Jaylin asked, tearing a hunk of bread from a wicker basket.

Guyaume nodded, parting the booth curtain and glancing over the room.

"Well the food looks excellent," Jaylin continued, "but I've seen enough this morning between our arrival and the streets leading to this place to make me loathe eating any of it." He shook his head, squeamish.

Guyaume smiled. "That was your first time seeing a public branding, yes? You'd never seen one before?"

"Never," Jaylin replied. "In Atabyrion, we lock up our lawless ones in gaols. Those men were thieves, right?" Seeing Guyaume's assent, he continued. "And they were branded with a circle of hot iron and thrown into the city sewers." He shook his head. "A harsh punishment, my lord. I caught the smell from one as we walked by one of the grates. Sweet Aster, they are foul."

"The punishment is no harsher than the crimes they commit. You must understand, the only way to maintain control in the City is the fear of the law. And yet fear alone rarely stops this Tier from rioting. Remember what I told you earlier? It wouldn't surprise me if that man with the second circle was from the Tier of Aster. How many others had he robbed before being caught and punished today. Feel no pity for them, lad. Their crimes only get worse."

Jaylin sliced into the peppered pork with the dull table knife. "I had noticed the two previous scars. Each time someone is caught, they are branded?"

Guyaume nodded. "There are three circles in Aster, if you remember your religion. The priests make us punish three times, before allowing the headsman's axe to fall. Except for murder or rape."

"And how far do the sewers go? I'd heard somewhere that no other city in the Quaylon had such an interest in filth as Minya."

"And no other city is as large as ours either, lad. They run from the Tier of Median down here to the Tier of Minya. Once a week, Konen Dam is opened to release part of the flood and to wash the sewers clean."

"And the criminals swim in it?" Jaylin asked, disgusted.

"The sewers are a place without law. Those who disdain our laws do not deserve the freedoms of those who do not. You will come to see this in time."

"Freedom. I suppose you could call it that. Now, tell me more about the woman who wanted to take me. She was obviously part of the Espion at one time. If you don't loathe her more than the plague, then you're the best play actor I've ever seen. Does she have any circles on her shoulder?"

Guyaume's eyebrows raised. "Does she have any circles? Her? I don't think so, lad. No, she's

too clever to end up in the sewers." Guyaume sat back and folded his arms. His expression was guarded. "She has as many names as there are Tiers in this city. Now she calls herself the Lady of Minya, or Lady Minya."

"She knew of your movements. That's a dangerous thought coming from the Head of the Espion."

He nodded. "You are quick, Jaylin. She joined us ten years ago, passing the Measure by uncovering and stopping a plot to poison one of the Marks of the Tier of Premye. She even became Prince Jevin's closest advisor. But after we taught her everything we could of our ways, she betrayed us and started her own faction. Her own Espion, shall we say."

Jaylin whistled. "The Prince wasn't pleased, I imagine."

"This is beyond displeasure. She learned all of our ways, all our hand signs. Then she began using her knowledge to start rebellions. The Gypsy Wars for instance. The student riots in Lunis. In the beginning, there was a war between her and Jevin. He offered the greatest ransom that had ever been seen for any other Minyan outlaw, the thief Ritasker of Aster included. He wanted her dead. She was his friend. He gave her a lot of power and privileges. It clearly went to her head like aged wine. I tell you, Jaylin, she's as elusive as a shade." He chuckled with bitterness. "We've hunted her, lad. Hunted her with all the Prince's resources. Whenever we discovered her stronghouses and raided them, she was nowhere to be found. Regardless of how swiftly we struck." His face darkened. "And in the end, her revenge was more than the Espion could afford to pay. Some were poisoned, others murdered. She nearly killed me when I hunted her."

"I believe you," Jaylin said, shaking his head at the tale. "And so Jevin made a truce with her. The one you accused her of breaking."

"Yes, that is how things are these days. Jevin and her came to an understanding, a mutual truce. He promised to stop hunting her if she promised to stop killing off Espion. As for what happened on the galleon." He shifted in his seat uncomfortably. "She did it to taunt me, to test the bounds of the truce. She does it often, never predictably. Somehow she knew about my mission to Atabyrion. She came on board this afternoon to learn about you." He paused again and glanced outside the curtain, spending a few moments to study the room. "I always look for new faces and those who are still around. If you're waiting around to kill a man, Jaylin, never sit in the same place."

Jaylin sat back in his chair, thinking about what Guyaume Reim had told him. The nobleman's body posture was uncomfortable, his gaze darting from face to face. From behind the curtain, the tavern keeper approached with two goblets of strong dark mead. Jaylin reached for the goblet. He choked on the thick spice swirling in it. It was a strange blend that left a gritty residue in his mouth. The meat was also speckled with the same spice.

"Myristica," Guyaume explained between nibbles. "Minyans put it on everything."

"Myristica," Jaylin said, thumping his chest. "It's not like mystaqua, is it?"

Guyaume smiled. "Do you think they'd be serving it here if it was? The two names sound similar, but they are very different. Myristica is from the Istanveren Isles. Down in this Tier, they serve the dregs…which is why you must chew before you swallow. In the greater Tiers, the myristica is more refined. A more subtle flavor."

Jaylin nodded and ate some slices from the peppered pork. He considered what he'd been told about Lady Minya. Looking up at the Espion, he decided to probe for more. "About Lady Minya, my lord. Is that all you're willing to tell me right now?" He smiled. "I know there must be more about her that you're unwilling to tell me."

Guyaume Reim shook his head. "By the Veil, you are brazen. But I like that about you Atabyrions. You say what you think. You'd talk down to the Deconeus of Aster instead of kissing his

hem. Let me just warn you, lad. Stay away from Lady Minya. She is more dangerous than you can know. Many of the new Espion don't even know about her, and nearly all the others believe she's a ghost. They dream of being the one to bring her to justice, to earn the Prince's favor and a ransom worthy of a Mark."

"Obviously that would be why I'm asking," Jaylin said dryly. "Is the Prince planning to do anything about her?"

"He's already tried. We suppose that she's from the Tier of Median or Lunis, a serving girl or student who worked her way by skill and cunning and incredible intelligence. She knows her way around the City better than any man. I devoted months to the hunt, and she nearly ruined me. She bested me with swords and knives and anything else I could try. Not that you would have done any better. You took a punch from a legion sheriff that any Espion could have blocked with a simple Tah Path maneuver." He shook his head. "You'll definitely need some training."

"And what did you expect me to do? Knock him down on the deck in front of his men?"

"Could you have knocked him down on the deck?"

Jaylin grinned. "Probably not. But I think I showed my good judgment in not avoiding the blow. It would only have made him more intent to bring me along." He tipped his cup of mead in salute and took another sip from it. "And I managed to avoid that fate with a little Atabyrion boldness."

Guyaume Reim smirked and drank from his mead cup. "No, Master Jaylin. She let you go. Don't delude yourself otherwise. It's time to be on our way. The main Espion safehouse in the Tier of Minya is an inn called the Bright Well." He set the goblet down. "Not bad swill for lower Minya. Almost drinkable. It's difficult finding decent places to eat and stay here in this Tier. The Bright Well is one of Jevin's investments. For nobles of the ring or sword only." He left a scoop of gleaming silver dyx on the booth table before going. "And Espion, naturally."

* * *

"While walking in the Tier of Minya," Guyaume said, "it's wise to keep to the main streets as much as you can. It is easy to lose sight of someone in these crowds. There are spies and thieves who watch and judge whether they could kill you or not. On the other hand, if you take the alleys, you are more likely to run into Keepers or men with circles branded on their arms." Horses and carts jammed the main road, but Guyaume led the way through the maze of bodies and towering buildings. "You can trust a tavern run by the blacksmith guild…see how the sign is hung up by metal rungs? It means the owner is strong enough to defend it. Any inn with the smell of bath salts, well, they are for whores with the stitches. Stay away from them. The public bath houses get better the further north you go. Myself, I wouldn't bathe in one were I covered in dog vomit." He glanced at Jaylin's shirt. "You may want to make an exception though, lad, for you reek like a fishmonger."

Jaylin had a good sense of direction, but the roofs were so high that he couldn't see the sun. He had no idea where the docks were, or even how far they had walked or what direction was north. In Abyri, one could go across town to the other end in a few hours. In Minya, it took many days to travel the distance between the farthest Tiers. At first Jaylin did not believe that, but as they kept walking and walking, he began to understand it. The distance was not necessarily so great, but there were so many people, carts, horses and legion sheriffs fighting to pass each other that it became difficult to move at a reliable speed.

"How do you tell which way is north?"

"The church bells, lad. They ring the times of devotion for the priests as well as Curfew

beginning and ending. I suppose they are some subtle reminder that Aster is looking over His children. All of the bell towers are enclosed except on the south side. That way, one can tell where north is and how far away you might find a church. They are the main landmarks in the Tiers, lad."

At the next chime, Jaylin listened for it and smiled, for he could tell the direction the sound came from. Bells rang all over the city. He noticed, though, that they were heading east.

"If Premye is on a ridge to the north," Jaylin asked, "why are we going east?"

"Because the Bright Well is in the middle of the Tier, on the northern side. This is a faster route. In general, it is always faster walking east and west than it is moving north and south. There isn't enough daylight left to reach the Tier of Median. Don't forget that Curfew happens the second hour after sunset."

"When do you think we'll reach Jevin's manor?"

"Tomorrow certainly. It depends on how crowded the streets are after the celebration of Advent. For two days they crowd around the Semn to get a good view of the oil boats in the river and then slowly work their way back to their homes in a stupor." He grimaced. "Look there, lad. Someone else is going to be dumped into the sewer tunnels."

"I'd rather not watch this time," Jaylin said as the legion sheriffs unlocked the grate lid. The smell of the sewers – that alone could kill a man. "I notice that very few in the Tier of Minya wear a blade, but there are some. Are they illegal everywhere?"

The Espion nodded. "Except in the Tier of Premye. You've probably heard about nobles of the sword. That means that one has the right to wear a sword and commission sentries who can wear them. Nobles of the ring have to purchase the right."

"Nobles of the ring?"

"Nobles of the ring are folks from other Tiers who have bought their way into Premye. Wealthy merchants from Median or scholars from Lunis. Rarely those, though. Nobles of the ring do not have the prestige of being noble born, since only birth gives that. But they hope their money will attract marriage portions with the nobles of the sword, thus earning the right for their children. There are many lesser houses in the Tier of Premye. But scarcely more than a score of them are truly nobles of the sword. When the riots break out, the legion sheriffs can usually quell them. But occasionally they are so severe that the Sovereign sends Prince Jevin and the Marks of Premye to help break it up. The rabble may feel brave against a sheriff's club, but not against steel sabers and highlanders. If you are caught with a blade and you don't have a signet ring to prove which Mark you work for, they will confiscate it and dump you in the sewers."

As they continued into the twisting maze of the Tier of Minya, Guyaume talked nearly the entire way. It was good, plain advice about how to survive in such a complex city. The shadows thickened like brick mortar around them, veiling the side alleys. Having huge buildings wall in everything around him was uncomfortable, but intriguing as well. He saw street beggars discreetly exchange silver or trinkets for tiny bags. Some beggars slept in the gutters, an empty cask cradling their heads. Dogs sniffed and growled at Jaylin's legs as he walked by. The bells rang again and Guyaume pointed to a sturdy-looking inn with a dazzling lamp hanging from its sign – *Bright Well*, painted in yellow letters on dark stained wood.

The Bright Well was lit with scores of oil lamps and smelled of sage-rose and myristica. A huge main hall opened up the middle, stuffed with thick couches and sturdy pine tables. There was plenty of mead and buttered wafers, even jars of Pontic pickled fish, which Jaylin had always wanted to try. Some of the Espion welcomed Guyaume and Jaylin, but the names went by so quickly that Jaylin couldn't remember any except a sturdy young man about his own age named Riveyra. Jaylin accepted the offer of a fresh bath and a change of clothes and went away to a private room to enjoy it.

Afterwards, he joined Guyaume Reim in the lounge for a drink of spiced mead. The flavor was more subtle and refined than the gritty froth he'd swallowed at the Shore Trove. A few of the many beauties in the room eyed him playfully, offering winks and giggles. Some were Espion, he decided, and some were there to serve the Espion men. He nodded to some but didn't invite any over with a smile.

Songs and talk filled the air, accompanied by the bright strains of a gourd guitar, velvet-hammered dulcimers and even six tabors. Mead from the foamy pitchers and dinner – an excellent roast goose with orange and cinnamon sauce – filled Jaylin with contentment. Drowsiness stole over him. His first night in the City of Minya. He wanted to stay awake all night, to inhale the City and its seducing colors and sounds. Fatigue proved stronger than excitement.

"I'll meet you in the morning, my lord," Jaylin said to Guyaume. "I'm anxious to meet Prince Jevin."

The nobleman nodded and worked on another cup of mead. "We'll leave early, lad. Be ready."

Jaylin approached the tavern keeper and asked for a key to a room. The man laughed. "There aren't any keys to the Bright Well, my Atabyrion friend. Choose any room with a bed and it's yours. If someone is using it, the door will be closed. There's a loft at the top if you miss seeing the stars."

Jaylin nodded and dragged himself up the steep staircase. The inn had at least four levels, and he went all the way to the top, just to see what it was like. Huge timber beams raised the sloping roof even higher, all awkward angles. The loft had a crooked slope to the floor, one window on each peaked end of the room, and six stuffed pallets on wooden bed beams crowded from wall to wall. The smell of sage-rose candles scented the room, though none were lit.

"Espion come and they go," Jaylin muttered to himself, rubbing his eyes. He liked the Bright Well. For all the squalor of the Tier of Minya, it was the first place where he remembered seeing people smile. Running his hand through damp hair, he sat at the dormer window, remembering meeting Lady Minya that morning. When he thought of her smoky gray eyes, he wondered where she was. At some inn sipping mead? Or the palace seducing the king? His hair squeaked between his fingers as he rubbed the long locks. Maybe he should cut it back a little. There were many in the Tier of Minya with long hair, but he wondered if the fashion was stricter in the Tier of Premye. Would Jevin insist he look Minyan and not Atabyrion?

He opened the dormer window and looked down the dizzying distance to the cobbled street. The inn across from the Bright Well had a window about three spans away, and he was sure he could reach it if he stretched out. The buildings were cramped together all the way down the street, both ways. A building this size would have been considered a watchtower in Abyri. A cool night breeze nipped at the sweat on his neck.

Leaning out, he gripped the railed gutter and tested its strength. It was firm. In a practiced motion, he swung out and over it. On the roof, he crouched and tested the firmness of the shingles. Memories of the Highwater Inn made him think of home. He walked up the slope of the roof and stood in the hot night air, his arms folded. The city gave off heat, shedding it like a griddle pan. The stars were all but lost in a sea of smoke. Looking down the street, he saw inn rooms without curtains. Cackles and laughter drifted along the wind, followed by shrieks of rage and fits and sobs. The city was alive and breathing with sounds. It was like standing at the very top of the world.

He walked smoothly down the roof and grabbed the rail of the dormer, swinging around through the open window.

And landed on top of a pretty serving girl.

* * *

The impact startled them both. Jaylin stumbled and caught himself on his arm to keep from crushing her.

"By the Veil, you scared…you scared me!" Her honey-brown eyes widened. "What in Aster's holy name were you doing out on the roof, sir?"

"I'm very sorry," he said with a laugh, hurrying back to his feet. He offered a hand to bring her up. "The room was empty when I left it. I always prowl before I sleep."

"Thank you," she said. He recognized her from the lounge – one that hadn't smiled or giggled. She had only watched him. Her hair was dark, her face pretty though a little plump. She was certainly not as alluring as Lady Minya, but she had an appealing look. "My name is Reonna," she said, brushing off her gown. "And you must be as limber as a cat."

"A good evening to you, Mistress Reonna," Jaylin offered with a nod, sitting on the dormer sill. "I'll take that last bit as a compliment."

"This is your first day in Minya, isn't it?" He replied with a simple nod. "You look tired. If you sit on the edge of the bed, I'll massage your neck and shoulders. It will help you sleep." Her smile was inviting.

Jaylin smiled at her. She wore a modest bodice that was full beneath. He had heard that Aster's somber sobriety was more prevalent in the lower Tiers. Rumor had it that some of the noblewomen of Premye were absolutely shameful when it came to the cut of their gowns. He was pleased though with Reonna's sense of demure, though he had no doubt she was there to serve any of the Espion's needs. "As a cat, I make it a practice never to refuse a good back rub," he said with a smile. "But I'd like to know who is behind the hands that give it. Did someone send you?" He watched her eyes to see if she lied.

"No," she answered. She held out her hands for him to inspect. "You see, they're mine after all."

Either she was telling the truth or she was so used to lying that he would never be able to believe her. Jaylin chuckled and sat down on the edge of the nearest bed. "I'm Jaylin Warnock of Atabyrion," he said. She smelled pretty, like alyssum flowers. The bedposts creaked.

She pressed her fingers into his shoulders. "I know who you are." She might not have been the prettiest girl Jaylin knew, but she did have good hands. Her thumbs worked loose his shoulder muscles, small circles growing larger and larger.

"A little to the left," he said, "Aaahhh, there."

"I know the Espion is trying to recruit you."

"Is that why you're providing this...aahh, good, a little harder...this service?" His muscles relaxed. She moved to his neck next. "You are good, Reonna."

"I heard about what you did in Atabyrion – how you saved that boy and girl from a Keeper." He turned and looked at her incredulously. "Don't look so shocked, Master Jaylin, this is the Espion stronghouse in this Tier. We know more about what happens out in the Quaylon than nearly anyone else. When I heard the story, I hoped to meet you. I watched you in the lounge. Meisha and Tatina bet three dyx as to which of them would flatter you best, but I could see right away that you weren't interested in them." She moved closer, her mouth near his ear. "You are more cautious. More controlled than some of the men Jevin has brought on."

"What do you mean?" He turned to look at her.

Her eyes were serious. "Some men would sell their mothers as slaves to be an Espion. And many…start abusing the power once they get a little taste of it. Jevin usually has to rein them in by their passions. You're young, but clever too. Maybe clever enough to avoid getting caught in his web."

"Jevin's web? You called me a cat. Are you saying the Prince is a spider?"

The massage increased pressure, igniting little tingles of pain in his shoulders and then she relaxed it. "Many Espion come through here, Jaylin. But the one thing you should know about Jevin is that he controls people who take too much a share of a meat pie to themselves. One way or another. He rewards those who deserve it, but he'll try to find a way to control you if you don't control yourself."

"And why are you telling me this?" He turned and looked at her again, an idea blooming in his mind. It was the way she said his name. Without waiting for her answer, he continued, "Because you know Jevin, don't you."

She smiled and nodded and looked deeply into Jaylin's eyes. "You remind me a little of him." She massaged the back of Jaylin's neck. "And how he was ten years ago. I know he was pleased with what he heard about you. The Espion is not as powerful as it was in the past. During the reign of the Alvarons, it had power throughout the Quaylon. But its influence has ebbed as the Deconeus' control has grown. I think Jevin would like to change that. To make us strong again. I think that's why he sent for you."

She leaned closer and her hair tickled his neck. "And if you do become someone important in the Espion, you'll be back to the Tier of Minya, and you'll stay here." Her voice was soothing. "You'll want to stay here. You see, I want you to remember Reonna's hands, that she only wanted to talk to you, and to listen to you. You probably have a pretty Atabyrion lass back home. Right now, you need a friend you can be yourself with." She leaned back and started the massage again. "Am I right about you?" she asked.

"You missed one thing," Jaylin said. "I also like a woman who smiles." He gave her a warm one himself.

Reonna smiled back.

"That's better. So Jevin sent you to spy on me…I mean help me? To keep me from making the mistakes that most new Espion do. I'm rather flattered."

"You should be," she answered.

"And you don't do this for every Espion then. You have favorites?"

"Have you heard what we say about jealousy and envy?"

"Favorites then." He looked at her seriously. "Now, if I do make it back to the Bright Well soon, which I plan to do, would you be willing to help me further?"

"Help you what?"

"Earn my Espion ring," he said. "I don't want it given to me."

"Oh, it won't be," she promised.

By the look in her eyes, he believed her.

CHAPTER THREE
Tousann Manor House, Tier of Premye

Dark, rich tapestries adorned the walls of the manor house of Prince Jevin Tousann. The designs were intricate and colorful; a spinning weave of flowers, vines, and copper-colored dragons. It defied Jaylin's imagination that someone had the patience to weave such a thing. The inner hall was cool, sheltered from the summer's glare, and bore a dragon banner that matched the badges Jaylin had already seen. Tall marble pillars and sculpted tiles gave the hallway a patterned look. Oil lamps glowed from bronze braces set into the walls.

"Where is the Prince?" Guyaume said to a chamberlain as they strode down the corridor. "The gate captain said there was an urgent message from him."

"The Prince will be expecting you in the City Room when he returns, Lord Reim," the trim chamberlain answered. "He's at the palace and will arrive shortly."

Guyaume nodded and motioned for Jaylin to follow. The main corridor arched twenty spans high. Balconies overlooked the walkway. Part way down the east passage, Guyaume turned and approached a huge oak door with fluted woodwork and a gilt-edged symbol of the Minyan religion decorating it. The symbol was ever present in the City – a triangle with circles offset at its points. Grabbing the door handle, he shoved it open.

The reason it was called the City Room became obvious.

A hexagonal table with a map of the entire city dominated the center of the room, but there were other tables with maps of the surrounding lands and nations of the Quaylon as well. As Jaylin looked closer, he saw small figurines at different locations throughout the collection of cities and countries. He wondered if they represented Minya's armies or Espion locations. There were no windows in the room, only tall lamps filled with orange-oil. The air smelled slightly of cinnamon and orange. Several couches and chairs surrounded the fancy tables. Near the door stood a serving table thick with dishes of fresh fruit and wafers and other treats of the Premyen nobles, not to mention tall bottles of mead and even Atabyrion ale. Guyaume shut the door behind them. He motioned to a couch and offered Jaylin a chance to sit.

"That was an odd greeting by the gate captain," Jaylin said. "What do you think happened to cause so much alarm?" He eyed the tray of wafers, noticing that Guyaume had already grabbed several.

"Any number of things. What surprises me is there was no word at the Bright Well this morning, which means whatever it was happened very recently." He took a few bites from the wafer, then wiped the crumbs from his goatee. "If there were a riot, we would have had to pass through it to get here. I wonder if Alvaron…hmmm, there are too many possibilities. Make yourself comfortable, Jaylin. I'm sure you are weary. I'll return when the Prince arrives."

Jaylin nodded to the nobleman as he left and then scooped up a handful of wafers himself. Juggling them in one hand, he poured himself a cup of mead and then went to the map table in the center. Nervousness had settled in his stomach since he had awoken that morning. He had images in

his mind of what the Marks of Premye were like, but no true experience dealing with such noblemen. It would be torture working for a haughty man, someone who treated others like ashes. But what if Jevin were like that? How did one walk away from service to such a man? Was that the reason Lady Minya had betrayed the Espion?

Banishing the negative thoughts, he studied the pattern and design of the city map, as well as where the little figurines were positioned. He noticed that there were none within the Tier of Aster. The mapmaker had done an excellent job rendering the City. He bit into a wafer and traced his finger from the docks to an inn marked with a lamp symbol. The Bright Well. There were no figurines there either, so he assumed that those represented soldiers at Jevin's command, and not Espion.

Next, he traced the route they had taken through the Tier of Median that day and surprised himself by how well he remembered it after walking it once. The map showed each building and street. Beneath the frail paper, he saw previous layers as sections of town had been broken down and replaced. He shook his head in amazement. He could spend a year studying the map.

"Well, my lord Prince," Jaylin said with a sigh. "You are the richest man I'll probably ever serve." He wasn't sure what to think about the comforts and expenses of a Prince of Minya. What sort of man would they make him? Someone used to getting his own way? Wealth bought power – but it could not buy trust.

Jaylin retreated to one of the couches. He balanced the cup on his lap. He wasn't normally one to worry about things prematurely. Worrying never did him any good. Instead, he focused on something that might be useful. He remembered the anxiety of the gate captain they had met entering the Tier of Premye. Something significant had happened in the Tier. Something that involved the Espion. The look on Guyaume's face had betrayed the sense of frustration. So many tangled events and worries to juggle. So many obligations for the Prince. Jaylin smiled to himself. They certainly needed some help with it all.

* * *

"You must have tired him out, Guyaume. He's asleep."

Jaylin came awake at once, not realizing he had dozed. He sloshed mead on his lap as he hurried to his feet. Jaylin knew it was Prince Jevin, even though the man did not wear a tunic or badge showing that. Instead, he wore dark browns and greens, a fine velvet doublet with flat sleeves and billowy shoulders. Jevin was just about Jaylin's height and build, with brown hair and goatee that glimmered with streaks of gold in the lamplight, neatly trimmed in the Minyan fashion. The family resemblance with Guyaume was startling, though the older man's goatee had streaks of gray, not gold, and he was definitely stockier than Jevin.

Despite the Prince's subdued attire, his eyes were cunning, and they put Jaylin on his guard almost at once. They probed, searched, and judged him all in a glance. Jaylin couldn't decide if the Prince's eyes were brown or green – they seemed to hover between both colors. He was thirty years old, if that. Younger than Jaylin had expected him to be.

"I thank Aster you've arrived safely, Jaylin Warnock of Abyri." A disarming smile appeared on his face, and he extended his hand. "Welcome to Minya."

As Jaylin gripped his hand, Jevin pulled him close and clapped him on the back, a proper Atabyrion salute between two friends. That he knew the tradition spoke volumes.

Awkwardly, Jaylin returned the embrace and then withdrew. His stomach twisted in knots, but he tried to keep the anxiety from his voice. "Greetings, Prince Jevin. I am impressed with your manor house."

Guyaume attacked the tray of wafers again.

"It's a pity I have so much work to go through right now with Guyaume," Jevin said. "But truly, I would rather speak to you first before hearing all his news." He leaned back against the map table, folding his arms. "Was your voyage pleasant? Did you get a chance to celebrate the Advent of Summer?"

"As much as I desired to," Jaylin said, noticing that Jevin was a good listener. His attention and interest was focused. "We left the Eve of Advent. The trip was a little choppy – I only lost my stomach twice." He watched Jevin's gaze flick back to Guyaume once and realized that they were communicating silently. Jaylin was astute enough to catch the subtle movements – the hands, the body posture shifts, but not the eyes. He did not know what they meant or what was being said about him.

Jevin motioned for Jaylin to sit back down on the couch, and he took a chair himself. Guyaume hovered in the rear, fetching himself and Jevin a goblet of mead. "I sent Uncle Guyaume to Atabyrion to recruit someone who might do well as an Espion." He took the cup and swirled the mead inside it before sipping from it. "Thank you, Uncle. I hope he didn't waste a trip."

"I don't think he did," Jaylin said, leaning forward and giving the Prince a serious look. So far, his fears about the Prince were unfounded. He was very personable. "You need someone who can bring in Lady Minya."

A goblet thumped on the table and Guyaume Reim stared at him. "Lad, I never said…"

"You didn't ask me directly, my lord – I didn't intend to misspeak." He looked at the Prince. "I understand that she's been a problem for you. Maybe I can help."

The Prince regarded him and a little smile tugged at his mouth. "You aren't the first who's asked to go up against her, Jaylin. But don't you think you lack the experience and the training? My uncle could not bring her to heel, and he's the most capable Espion I've ever known. Are you implying that a young man from Atabyrion could do better than a Minyan-born Espion?"

Jaylin held up his hand. "I know I need to prove myself to you, my lord. I just want you to recognize that I understand some of the implications of being part of the Espion. But to answer your question, I think I would stand a better chance." He looked at Guyaume. "You think like a Minyan. I do not." He looked back at Jevin. "Isn't that why everyone else has failed? Isn't that why you brought me here?"

"An Atabyrion as bold as they come," Jevin said in a soft voice, meeting the look. "I think he's trying to make a good impression. What do you think, Guyaume?" His shrug and shifting in his seat said something his mouth didn't.

Guyaume nodded. "Boastful as an Atabyrion. Lady Minya nearly took him in off the ship."

"But she didn't," Jaylin said. "I know I have training to complete. Like that silent language you're using. I'm starting to feel left out."

Jevin chuckled and his greenish eyes twinkled. "You were right, Uncle. You were very right about this one." The smile didn't leave his face and he shook his head, chuckling. He rose and took several paces, sipping sparingly from the cup.

"Jaylin, when I heard about the Wumsiah case in Abyri, I was intrigued. You seemed to go right to the heart of the matter. Like one of my hunting dogs on a scent. And you saved the two children from a Keeper who may have shipped them to Minya as slaves… or worse." He regarded Jaylin with respect. "That ability is natural, I think. We've been looking for someone like you for…about two years now, Guyaume? A foreigner to Minya, as you said, someone aloof from our traditions and devotions. Like money not being the sole purpose of existence. Imagine such blasphemy. We wanted someone about your age. You see, Lady Minya won't be young forever."

His eyes narrowed. "Guyaume has told me, in our 'secret' little language, that I should give you a chance."

Jaylin looked hard at him. "But what do you think, Prince Jevin?"

"I don't send the head of the Espion to Abyri on a whim. Nor do I give my trust lightly. I'll give you a chance, Jaylin. A chance to prove you are worthy of trusting. Guyaume will assign an Espion to oversee your training until you pass the Measure and can be assigned to work in a Tier that suits you." He clapped his hands and brushed them together. "Now, for some stuffy Minyan court tradition. It's best to get it out of the way quickly. In here, the City Room, call me Jevin. In here, you need never guard your tongue with me, can say what you feel. I leave the groveling and mincing for court favor to my brother at Shallic Palace."

He paused to make sure Jaylin knew he was joking. "I will forgive you any offense except treason. To your fellow Espion in a safehouse, you can hate the color of my doublets and bemoan my exacting demands. But out there," he said, pointing to the door, "I am a Prince of Minya, and others will expect you to follow Minyan conduct regarding nobles of the sword. You will address me by my title and never countermand me. I must maintain order in my house and in the City." He offered Jaylin a smile. "But here, my title goes away, and I am simply Jevin. Now…can an Atabyrion come to accept that?"

"You mean I don't have to keep calling you 'my lord'?"

"No, Jaylin. Not in here." He leaned forward, his eyes glowing with the lamplight. "What do you think? Are you ready to lose yourself in service to this City as I have? I want Minya to be a strong nation – not through fear of our force or from threatening to withhold trade. We earn the Quaylon's respect by our cunning and our wit. But there is dissent among the nobles. There always has been. My brother and I can only do our best to try and cure it. There is still so much to do, yet we cannot do it alone. This City breeds contempt and jealousy. I need men I can trust. I need Espion to help prevent riots – not to start new ones."

"I appreciate your candor," Jaylin said with a nod. His fears had all blown to the winds and he wondered why he had bothered worrying about any of them before actually meeting the Prince. If Jevin was sincere, it would be a privilege working for someone like him.

He looked deep into Jevin's eyes. "You're referring to Lady Minya and the damage she's done. I want you to know that I appreciate the opportunity to serve you. But if I am to serve you, I need you to be honest with me as well. Something happened while your uncle went to Atabyrion to fetch me. What?"

The Prince looked to Guyaume. The older man glanced at Jaylin offhandedly and then shrugged. Jevin looked back at Jaylin. "The shrug means I can tell you if I want."

"I figured that one on my own."

Jevin grinned. "The king has a problem. Lady Kalisha is missing – has been since before the oil boats launched the Eve of Advent."

"Who?"

"Kalisha is the king's…mistress," Guyaume said.

"The king's mistress," Jaylin said, suddenly confused.

"Yes. My brother, Davin-Noll, the Sovereign of Minya, is very concerned about her, fearing maybe that the Queen has threatened her. She left no messages, yet there does not appear to be any evidence of abduction. Her belongings are still in her room at Shallic Palace. Her home in the Tier of Median was searched and her valuables were all missing, but the gowns and furs were left undisturbed. Either she's fled or she's been kidnapped. My brother is getting desperate regarding her safety. He entrusted this matter to the Espion last night. If we can't find her, he may decide the Espion

is no longer worth the expense to the royal coffers."

Guyaume Reim frowned and took a swallow of mead. "You can understand the seriousness of this matter, Jaylin." He turned his attention back to the Prince. "Were she and the king quarreling? Any witnesses of that?"

Jevin shook his head. "No, they never quarrel. She's not the queen and she knows it. I started the investigation in your absence, Guyaume, but I'll turn it over to you. We know she recently finished a gown for Princess Keyana. I've had the servants interviewed but they have nothing useful to offer us. She's never had any confidantes at court."

"Who do you suspect?" Guyaume asked.

"I don't have enough information to suspect. The evidence leads my brother to implicate the Queen. But would she really believe Davin-Noll would replace her with a seamstress? The City would riot for certain if he did! But jealousy…it's not always logical. If the Queen is holding Kalisha, or has threatened her safety in any way, he wants to know of it. His orders were, more precisely, to find her."

"Does the queen know about Lady Minya?" Jaylin asked, leaning forward.

Guyaume and Jevin looked at each other and then at Jaylin. "Why do you ask that?" Jevin asked.

"I've been wondering something since I arrived yesterday. Why was Lady Minya waiting for us? She wanted to learn about me, that much was obvious. When the gate captain mentioned something had happened while the head of the Espion was away, I made the connection. Lady Minya could benefit a great deal from the king's troubles. She could have arranged the abduction at the urging of the Queen. Naturally, the king would ask the Espion to find his mistress, which would lead us into conflict with her." He shrugged. "Maybe that's the excuse she needs to break your truce. If this is the case, your little war with her is about to start all over again. And maybe the king will decide that this Espion war is no longer worth the cost." He waited for a response.

"What do you think, Jevin?" Guyaume said in a low voice. "Would she do something like this?"

Jevin rubbed his chin. "By the Veil, but it does make sense. Our friend here is quick to make connections. She knew that you sailed for Atabyrion, Uncle. That gave her just enough time before you returned with Jaylin."

"It also explains her audacity on the docks," Guyaume said with a grunt. "She knew the truce was over – or suspected it would be shortly...?"

Jevin shook his head. "Yes, but would the Queen have any contact with her? I think not. She has her own spies, has no need of…"

"Unless Lady Minya instigated it," Jaylin said. "The King's mistress would be the perfect target for Lady Minya to injure the Espion. She knows she can't make the first move – at least openly – because of the truce. Instead of stomping on the ant hill, she's tossed a rock on it."

"It would be a very shrewd move, " Guyaume said. "Abducting the Queen, the Princess, or anyone else wouldn't work. The Sovereign could close the ports, have the sheriffs raze the City and mobilize the army to quell rioting. For a mistress, however, he would need to be discreet."

"Oh, she's a clever little fox," Jevin said with utter distaste. "But where would she take Kalisha? Let's say you are right. It's all in vain if we don't find her."

Jaylin needed a moment to reason it out. Excitement churned inside him. What if Jevin let him take this assignment? What a way to begin with the Espion! He glanced around the room and remembered the table by the door with the fruit, wafers, and mead. After approaching the table, he poured himself another drink and took a few bites from a wafer.

"I think the more important question," Jaylin said, "is where to find Lady Minya."

The Prince's eyebrows lifted. "You don't really expect she'll make this easy for us? Leaving enough clues to lay blame on her?"

"Everyone leaves clues, Jevin. The difficult part is tracking them to the source. I learned that in Abyri. It's hardly an equal to this city, but what is? In the Wumsiah case, I went to the home where the young boy and girl were abducted. Other sheriffs had searched the place thoroughly, but I found a broken latch in the window downstairs that let the Keeper in. Outside the window, I found a piece of his cloak. It smelled like a root cellar." Jaylin took another sip from the cup. "Where was the king's mistress last seen?"

"The Espion last saw her leaving Shallic Palace," Jevin said. "So far, we've concluded that she attempted to return to her house in Median. Her neighbors saw her return alone. She hasn't been seen since, though I sent an Espion alert for her this morning. It hasn't been that long. With the crowds during Advent, it would be easy to abduct someone."

Jaylin set the mead goblet down. "And even harder to find the trail. I'd like the assignment."

Guyaume chuckled. "We appreciate your ambition, Jaylin. But you haven't even been trained yet."

"I was trained in investigations in Abyri. Maybe not in the Espion way. Granted, my way was not really the legion sheriff way either. What do you have to lose? If I fail, one of your other Espion will find her. If I succeed, I'll have earned my place and you'll know whether or not it's worth training a mercer's son. I'd like to pass the Measure now." He smirked. "And get it over with."

"You don't realize what you're asking," the Prince said, shaking his head. "I have trained Espion already qualified to engage in this assignment. Proven men…"

"I'm not asking you to stop them."

"The City is dangerous, Jaylin," Guyaume said. "There are other forces at work here. Without an Espion ring to protect you..."

"I've never had one before, Guyaume. Perhaps I'm making a mistake. But what if I do find her?" He pointed his cup at Jevin. "It won't mean that I'm any better than your trained Espion. Luckier? Perhaps. More in tune with Aster's divine will than the rest of you?" He grinned. "Maybe it will show you that you haven't both made a mistake in bringing me here. If I disappoint you, I can always go back to Aerona Worsutton. Or maybe Jannis Wumsiah. She's only ten, but she said she'd wait for me."

The room was silent as the two noblemen stared at him.

"Persuasive," Jevin murmured.

"Very," Guyaume echoed.

"You realize you could be killed," Jevin pressed, "Thrown in the sewers, left to rot in a lazar house."

"I've been to a lazar house before," Jaylin said. "I never got a rash from it. So, do I get the assignment or not?"

"Why don't you give us a chance to talk it over," Jevin said. "I never make important decisions lightly. And I would never send one of my Espion into a slaughter."

"As you will, Jevin," Jaylin replied with a bow.

He knew, however, that he had already convinced them.

* * *

Jaylin stared at himself in front of the wall-length mirror in the City Room. His hair was

trimmed in the Minyan fashion, his neck naked and cold. He stared for several long moments, not recognizing himself. Sighing, he examined it from another angle. At least he knew it would grow back with time. A travel pack sat at his ankles, stuffed with wafers and a small cask of mead. A sturdy leather belt hung from his waist, bunching in a loose cotton tunic. Jevin had fixed several small bags of coins to hide in various parts of his clothing. The boots were special, designed for Espion with secret compartments for hiding tools and money. He kept his Atabyrion cloak.

"You're too handsome, I think," Jevin said over his shoulder. "You won't blend in at all."

Jaylin smiled. "I'm not trying to. Do you have the map, Jevin?"

The Prince handed him the folded scroll. Jaylin grabbed the travel pack and slung it over his shoulder. "So Kalisha had a home in the Tier of Median. Will I have any problem getting there?"

"I doubt it. I can send an errand to guide you to it at first, but after that you'll be on your own. Are you still determined to go so soon? I would hate to think I was such a bad host."

Jaylin shook his head. "Not at all. The longer you wait, the more difficult clues are to read. One of your hunting dogs would be helpful at this point, but I think I'll go it alone."

"Well, you Atabyrions have always been solitary and restless folk," Jevin said, and it sounded like a compliment. "Uncle, send for Loren Broan and have him go to Ishtriss Gate with a lantern to wait for Master Jaylin. Tell him to escort our young man here through Median to Kalisha's yard and then return to the manor tonight."

"Very well," Guyaume said. "Good luck, lad. And Aster's blessing upon you."

Jevin caught Jaylin's arm as he was about to follow Guyaume out. "I won't have you leave my manor from the traditional entrance. I'd rather show you a way to get back to this room from the outside." He approached one of the walls that contained a ceiling-to-floor map of the surrounding seas and the countries in the Quaylon. He showed Jaylin a latch on a wall panel near it, and a hidden door opened on well-oiled hinges.

"Follow me," the Prince said.

They walked together down a sloping path that ended at a deep stairwell. The corridor was made of stone with lamps mounted on the walls. Jevin took one and led the way down the stairwell. "I had this tunnel constructed when I first took over the Espion," he said. "There are four plateaus in the Tier of Premye, and my manor was built on the second. This tunnel goes straight down about fifty paces to the first plateau and exits through a secret gate. Only Espion can use it."

"What if someone finds it?"

"Believe me, there are enough levers and counterweights to seal off this tunnel. The only unwanted intruder I have not been able to trap within it is Lady Minya herself."

Finally, they reached a stone door.

"This is the lever," Jevin said, showing a loose rectangular stone brick. He pushed it in, and the stone door slid slowly open. The tunnel beyond was round and only half the height, so both men had to crouch to get through. At the end of the tunnel was an iron grate. Jevin showed him how to release the stone door from the outside.

"We're not far from my estate," Jevin whispered. "Do you see that glowing spire?" He pointed and Jaylin nodded. "That's one of the churches of Aster in Premye. Follow the light to it. Behind the church is a little wooded area with gardens and a footpath. The footpath leads to one of the wall towers. Wait for Loren at the gate." He traced his finger on the map to show where he should go. "This is the most direct path to Lady Kalisha's home in the Tier of Median. You will get there before Curfew. Minya is a dangerous city, but a beautiful one. Keep your wits and you'll do fine. Don't flaunt the silver dyx I gave you, don't get entangled with the legion sheriffs, and try not to end up with the stitches in a back-alley brothel."

Jaylin looked out the grate. The sun was starting to set and the sky was orange and violet. Puffy clouds stretched over the western mountains of Minya. It was still humid and warm. He paused by the gate and turned to Prince Jevin. "Can I get back inside the Tier of Premye without an Espion ring?"

Jevin shook his head no. "That's part of the Measure, Jaylin."

"One more question, then. Is there an easy way for me to get a message to you? I imagine you'd want to know when I find her."

"*When* you find her. What an Atabyrion thing to say. Pay an errand, Jaylin. They are for hire at every gate. Since you don't have a ring, you won't be able to seal it securely, so be careful about the information you send. If you get in too much trouble, let me know. Oh, and one more thing." He held out his hand. "No weapons are allowed in the City. That's the fastest way into the sewers."

Jaylin begrudgingly gave him his two daggers. Jevin looked at the weapons, a strange look on his face.

"What is it?" Jaylin asked.

"Lady Minya also used daggers," the Prince answered in a soft voice.

CHAPTER FOUR
Ishtriss Gate, Tier of Premye

Jaylin's plan was simple. If he found Lady Minya, he would find Kalisha. How she was abducted would be his first clue. After that, he didn't know what he would do, but he trusted his instincts.

After crossing the gutter drain, he reached the main road to the church of Aster. He approached the large gardens behind it and a row of tall alder trees. A footpath went beyond it. Jaylin listened to the sounds of the approaching night as he walked. Past the trees, the huge outer wall that surrounded the Tier of Premye loomed before him. At the base of a main tower, he found the gatehouse leading to Median. From the shadows, he studied the guards posted there, but they all wore the king's colors, not Jevin's black and green. The Sovereign of Minya's sentries had blue and murrey tunics with silver circles embedded in the triangle of Aster. Jaylin waited in the darkness. Farther down the wall, a bobbing torch grew brighter, showing a young man running along the wall toward the gatehouse. He had a plain face with pockmarks that gave him a weathered look. Thick brown hair covered his head.

Jaylin reached the gatehouse about the same time as the errand. Breathing heavily, the young man wearing the dragon emblem looked at Jaylin and said in a moody, deep voice, "Are you…the one I'm supposed…to meet?"

"It depends on who you are meeting and for what purpose. What is your name?"

The errand stopped and mopped the sweat from his face and bowed a little. "Loren Broan. I work for Prince Jevin of House Tousann, and I'm supposed to escort someone through the Tier of Median. What's your name?"

Jaylin extended his hand. "I'm Jaylin."

Loren shook his hand. His fingers were long and wide. "Shall we go?" At Ishtriss Gate, a few of the King's sentries nodded as they passed. Jaylin noticed them glance at Loren' tunic but they asked no questions. The young errand led them down the main street, parallel to the wall.

"How long have you worked for Prince Jevin?" Jaylin asked after it was obvious the errand would make no overtures of conversation. Loren kept a good stride, but Jaylin matched it.

"About three months. I was raised in Median – I know the way."

It took a little prodding after that to get him started, but once he did, Jaylin realized that Loren wasn't with the Espion at all. He was a simple young man with a great memory, the main requirement for his duty as an errand. Jaylin also discovered that the name Loren was common in Minya. He seemed to appreciate being asked questions, and he opened up more as they walked.

At their stride, Jaylin and Loren quickly crossed the western quarter of the Tier of Median with its cozy houses and apartments, tiny wooded parks and gardens. They met a company of legion sheriffs on patrol, but the bells hadn't rung Curfew yet in Median, so they were not stopped or questioned. The Prince's tunic was probably a shield, Jaylin guessed. They passed through a quaint

neighborhood with glowing fires and a wide street. The homes were different, but after seeing so many pass, he lost track of differentiating them at all. Loren took him through the twisting streets, crisscrossing the Tier with hardly any pattern or order. Finally, they reached a small row of houses with a stone arch guarding the street. The houses were made of old, ivy-scrubbed stone. The grounds and gutters were all well kept. A similar neighborhood would have been very costly in Abyri.

"Here we are," Loren said, pointing to a two-story dwelling at the end of the inlet. The house was wreathed in darkness, a shadowed spot amidst burning candles. "Easy enough to find when you see that arch."

"Have you met the woman who lives in that house?" Jaylin asked, not wanting to mention anything Loren didn't already know.

"Lady Kalisha? Oh yes, she is very nice. Very friendly." He blushed and smiled with awkwardness. "So, Master Jaylin – is that all I can do for you? I was told to escort you here and point out that house. Do you need anything else?"

Jaylin studied it, looking at its height and slope to get a clue for how it was arranged inside. How many upper rooms would it have – one or two? It didn't seem like it could hold more than that. "What have you heard about Lady Kalisha?"

"Everyone in Premye knows who she is, her being the king's favorite and all. Were you sent to fetch her? She's probably sleeping – I don't see any candles burning..."

"Follow me a moment," Jaylin said and started towards the house. "I don't remember when the last bell rang, Loren. When does Curfew start?"

"A little over an hour from now. The sun set just after the last bell tolled, so there's a little time."

"Thank you. Actually, I've never met Lady Kalisha," Jaylin said, trying for a regretful tone. He needed more clues. "Tell me what she looks like."

"She's beautiful," Loren said, abashed. "Pretty as a…as a spring flower."

That didn't help at all. A rose or a dandelion? What kind of lass did the Sovereign of Minya fancy so much? "Describe her. What is her hair like? Her eyes? How old is she?"

"Oh, she's older than me, if that's what you mean. But young and pretty. Her hair?" He paused, looking uncomfortable. "Light brown hair, almost gold. She normally wears it loose, down to here." He demonstrated it falling well down her back. "When you see her eyes, you won't forget them. Green. Not the Tousann hazel, I mean as green as oak leaves in the spring." He thought again. "She has a mole at the corner of her jaw, a little one. One of the nicest ladies in the Tier of Premye. I heard she once asked the king to pardon a debtor, to keep the son of a Mark from being exiled. And he did it too, for her. A few weeks ago, she smiled at me…" He flushed a dark crimson.

"Thank you, Loren." Jaylin could tell the conversation was making the errand edgy. He was intrigued by Kalisha's description. Her popularity certainly added flavor to Lady Minya's designs. The street ended at Kalisha's house. Shadows smothered the footpath leading up to the porch, but it appeared to be deserted. "Loren, would you wait for me for a few minutes?" It was impossible to tell if someone hid in the shadows ahead. Having a servant of the Prince nearby would be helpful.

"All right, Master Jaylin," he said, folding his arms. He stood as still as a post as Jaylin approached the footpath. He noticed an apple tree in the front with budding apple blossoms as he approached.

Jaylin took the front steps one at a time, listening. Just the breeze of a warm summer night and the subtle chirp of crickets. The darkness engulfed him. The path at the top of the stairs led to the porch. Two stone columns supporting an overhang stood before a door of dark varnished wood. A shallow alcove lay on each side of the door – a perfect place to hide, Jaylin realized, but too late.

"Who are you?" a deep voice challenged. Jaylin saw the dark shadow and recognized the silver trim on a black uniform.

A legion sheriff.

* * *

"Don't run, lad," the legion sheriff said in a warning voice, "you'll regret it. Now give me your name."

"You startled me." Jaylin swallowed, trying not to sound cowed. "I'm on an errand for the King's Will."

"Let me see your badge," the man said.

"My badge? I should like to ask the same of you," Jaylin said. He kept his voice calm. "What are the legion sheriffs doing outside the home of the king's mistress? My business isn't with you." He shrugged apologetically.

Jaylin saw a frown on the legion sheriff's face, half-hidden by the shadows. "You approached like a thief. If you don't show me a badge or signet-ring..."

Jaylin held up his hands, feeling a little peevish, and took a step forward. "Of course I was cautious, approaching an unlit house, not knowing who might be waiting behind a bush. As for my badge..." He waved Loren Broan over. "As you see, this was my escort. He's been standing there the whole time. Will that do?"

Loren hurried to the landing, holding his torch. He looked startled to see a legion sheriff, but kept a taciturn expression. With the light of the torch, Jaylin could see the sheriff's dark brown eyes and the small stubble growth on his chin. He looked tired.

The sheriff glanced at the tunic Loren wore and scrutinized the errand. "You work for the Prince?"

"Yes, sir," Loren said.

"What are you two doing here?" the sheriff asked. He sounded more annoyed than anything else.

Jaylin knew that most legion sheriffs took their authority too seriously. But when challenged by someone of higher rank, they backed down more often than not. "As I said, my business is not with you. If you still insist I'm a thief, you can accompany me inside while I do what I was sent for. Or you can stand out here and keep watch over an empty house. I don't bloody care which. Now stand aside."

The legion sheriff scowled. "I can't just let you in here. If you took anything…"

"If we were thieves, would we have walked up the road, bearing a torch, and wearing the Prince's tunic?" Jaylin asked. "I'm sure Prince Jevin will have words with your garrison commander or the Provost of Minya when he learns that a…"

The legion sheriff slid his truncheon back in the hoop on his belt and stepped aside. "It's all yours. By the bloody Veil, just don't make a mess of it!"

"Thank you," Jaylin said with a nod and approached the door. It was unlocked. He sighed with relief, gripped the handle latch, and pushed it open. He had no idea what he would have done if the house had been locked up. The interior was dark, but Jaylin spied a lamp stand right next to the entrance with a taper and shavings to light it. Loren lowered his torch to light the taper and then lit the lamp.

A warm glow filled the entryway, revealing a clean tiled floor. To the right was a living space with thick stuffed couches and craft hoops hanging from pegs in the wall. A large wooden frame

nestled in the far corner, and reams of fabric twirled around bamboo shafts. It was a very familiar sight to a mercer's son. Down the main hall, Jaylin saw a stairwell rise up to the second floor. A kitchen area went off to the left.

Loren Broan coughed and rubbed his mouth, looking at Jaylin questioningly. "I really should go." He looked around the room, his feet rooted to the tile.

The legion sheriff retreated back to the alcove outside. Jaylin looked over his shoulder at the errand. "Listen Loren, do you have anything on you that bears the Prince's seal or badge? Besides your tunic, that is."

Loren Broan scratched the back of his neck. "This is all that I have," he replied, tugging at his tunic. "And I need it to get back inside the Tier of Premye. I've only been in the Prince's service a short while. Not long enough to trust with a signet ring or badge."

"Hmmm," Jaylin murmured, disappointed. "Before you go, tell the sheriff outside that you are leaving me and that the Prince has authorized me to stay as long as I need. Will you do that?"

"Of course," he said. He looked around the room as if he were about to step on crystal, then went for the door.

"One more thing," Jaylin said. The legion sheriffs presence at the house unnerved him. "Tomorrow morning, I want you to deliver a message to the Prince for me. Tell him that if he doesn't hear from me in a day or two, then I probably ended up in the sewers."

Loren paled. "Master Jaylin, I wouldn't joke about that."

"I'm not." Jaylin gave a wary glance towards the sheriff. "Tell him who was waiting for me here. He'll understand."

With a nod, Loren shut the door behind him. Jaylin looked around the entryway once more. Lady Minya and the legion sheriffs had been waiting in the docks of Minya. Jaylin knew that if he was right, the sheriff would send someone to find her. If he spent the night, he might get a visit before morning from her.

Something like that might work out to his advantage. He decided to stay.

* * *

Jaylin sat in a cushioned chair next to Kalisha's desk, tapping his fingers on a sheet of folded paper. The Curfew bell had already tolled, but that didn't bother him at all. He had learned some things about Lady Kalisha right away. First of all, she was a very orderly woman. The floors were clean, her clothing folded and stacked neatly in drawers and chests. A seamstress by profession, she had an impressive array of needles, threads, ornaments, and her closet bulged with reams of linen and sewing tools. Brocaded silk, lavender velvets, and stitching combs of the highest quality. Her gowns were elaborate and beautiful, good enough for the nobles of Premye. He'd imagined a woman with a pretty face, not one with any talent.

Upstairs, however, he had found the hint he was looking for. It felt strange being in a woman's chamber uninvited, scrutinizing her wardrobe, her belongings, and her correspondence. Nothing tantalizing from the king, just letters to drapers and mercers, notes from her landlord who received his rent from the king's coffers, and requests for work. Literate and skilled.

But there was a note stuffed in the back that bothered him, and intrigued him. It was from an angry mercer, requesting her help in dealing with the Mark of Alvaron, a nobleman of Premye. Unpaid debts, threatening gestures. Typical excesses from a man bred to power. But was the mercer appealing to her as the king's mistress? He unfolded the note and read it again, bothered by the tone of a single phrase.

If you would kindly use your influence on my behalf, I believe the troubles would end.

Kalisha's influence with the king? Or her influence with the Mark? The reference wasn't specific, but Jaylin was able to imagine possibilities. Maybe he had been presumptuous about Lady Minya being involved. Maybe not. Maybe he was trying to read too far into a simple request for help. He wanted to prove himself to Jevin. Was that ambition misguiding him?

Jaylin stifled a yawn on the back of his hand.

There were no valuables in the house. A box was missing from her closet – he could tell by the thin scuff marks and the gap there now. No sign of violence or a struggle. That seemed strange, didn't fit an abduction. If her things were stolen, why had the expensive gowns been left behind? They were worth more than a box full of silver dyx. Unless she cooperated with the captors?

But that didn't make sense either. All of the seamstresses that Jaylin knew from his father's business had a special box of favorite needles and threaders. He'd yet to find Kalisha's, and so he suspected it was the missing box in the closet. Would the Espion even have known to look for it?

He stroked his chin and stared at the four-post bed. It looked as if it had been slept on somewhat recently, for the sheets were a little tousled. That seemed to be at odds with the tidy house. The more Jaylin thought about it, the more he considered that maybe she hadn't been taken, but left in a hurry and only had time to grab a few valuables, some food, and leave. He would search the outside grounds in the morning when it was lighter.

The sound that awoke him – he wasn't sure how much later – was the front door jerking open. A storm of boots shook the house downstairs and a rich voice cracked out commands.

It wasn't Lady Minya.

It wasn't the sheriff who had hurt him on the galleon, either.

* * *

"Secure the kitchen door and watch the windows! You're certain he hasn't left?"

Jaylin came to his senses fully. Panic had the unique ability to wash away grogginess. His neck was stiff from having slept in the chair, but he rose and stuffed the letter into his boot cuff. Easing the desk drawer shut, he listened to the commotion downstairs.

"He's still in here, my lord. No one has been in or out, save the mice. Try upstairs."

"Quickly now!" the man ordered. "Find him!"

The candle had guttered out, leaving the bedroom dark, but the hint of dawn came through a slit in the upstairs curtain. Jaylin wasn't sure how many men were below, but it wouldn't take them long to get upstairs. "Definitely should have found an inn instead," Jaylin muttered to himself. In hindsight, he should have acted differently.

It was also a little late to start looking for a place to conceal himself. The closet was small and he knew it would be difficult hiding there. He hurried to the window and noticed that the fastening bolt was not secured. Curious. After parting the curtain, he looked out over the roof above the kitchen right outside leading down both to the front street and to the back. The temptation to hop out and hide in the dark street was thwarted when he saw the sentries outside, holding torches since the sun had not risen enough to banish the shadows. They wore blue and murrey uniforms and had sabers belted to their waists. Their tabards were blue with three silver suns connected to a triangle.

The thudding of boots charged up the stairs. He would barely be out the window before they reached the room, and they would probably interpret flight as a proof of guilt. His stomach seized up

in knots. There was really only one thing he could do.

After turning around, Jaylin stood at the edge of the bed, ran his fingers through his newly cropped hair, and waited for the first sentries to arrive. He had been expecting to be confronted by legion sheriffs and Lady Minya, not the King's Guard. Two sentries came into the room and stopped when they saw him. Their hands went to the saber hilts.

"It's about time someone came," Jaylin said, trying to sound confident. "I waited all night."

Leaning away from the bed as the two sentries approached him, he started for the stairs. The sentries each grabbed him by an arm and escorted him down to Kalisha's living room. Pacing across the hardwood floor was a tall, well-built man, probably not much older than Prince Jevin. He had pale blond hair and intense blue-gray eyes. He wore the same tabard as the others, except Jaylin saw many rings glittering on his fingers. That many signet rings spoke of the man's power. He had a blond goatee like Guyaume's and he glowered at Jaylin as if he were nothing more than a kitchen roach. He did not look like a Tousann. His features were more handsome and blocky, more livid.

"Ahh," the nobleman said. "The fool did spend the night."

Jaylin noticed the long saber at his side. There was no knot tying it to the scabbard. The nobleman strode up to Jaylin, several inches taller, and wider across the shoulders. He was full of confidence and himself.

"Look at you," he said with pure condescension. Jaylin felt his temper flicker awake at the berating attitude. "Now I am not reputed to be a patient man, so I will ask you only once. Tell me where Kalisha is, or you will pray to Aster you had answered me more promptly."

"I don't know, my lord." Jaylin looked him right in the eye. "But perhaps we can find her together."

"Do not take that presumptuous tone with me, lad. I said I wasn't a patient man."

Squaring his jaw, Jaylin stared at him coldly, his Atabyrion temper simmering. "It's good for you that I am. I was sent here to find her, and if you'd asked the night watchman, he would have told you as much. I arrived with an official escort of the King's Will. As to her whereabouts, I know as much as the clues have told me…which may or may not be more than you know. Any further questions, my lord?"

"You have a sharp tongue for a thief."

Jaylin chuckled. "And I thought nobles of Premye were noted for their intelligence. But I forget that the University is on the other side of the river Semn, isn't it?"

"I am the Mark of Alvaron, you grubby snipe. And an officer of the King's Will…" He must have noticed Jaylin's eyes widen. "So you've heard of me? As you can see, I bear the symbol to prove it." He held up a jeweled fist that made Jaylin's blue sapphire ring look like a street merchant's bauble. "The guard I stationed here alerted me that you entered without a badge or signet. So unless you can prove that you are authorized to be here, I hold you suspect for her abduction."

Jaylin didn't like to be surprised. Ever. "I do not serve the House of Alvaron. I serve the House of Tousann. And so do you. I don't care what you're the 'Mark' of. That legion sheriff was witness that I came under escort with an errand of Prince Jevin. That is the only witness I need, and if you're too blind to believe that..."

"The Prince? I should have known. So Jevin's hand is in this? What has he done with her?" His fist tightened around Jaylin's tunic and brought his face close to Jaylin's.

"Ask Jevin yourself. I was sent here to find her."

"Oh, I am certain he would verify the sun was black just to spite me! Show me his hands." The guards holding Jaylin's arms lifted his hands and the Mark of Alvaron nodded. "No Espion ring. Not even a badge. You are an impostor." His voice dropped low and Jaylin could feel his breath on his ear.

"Tell me what he's done with her, lad."

Jaylin's anger hissed inside him, but some of the pieces were beginning to fit together already. It made some sense to him now. The letter in his boot. The Mark's behavior. He was completely daft for the girl – Jaylin could see it in his eyes. Jealousy and Envy, mirrored twins. "I think you already know, Alvaron. Didn't she leave because of you?"

"What?" Alvaron said, his face twisting with anger.

It was a stab in the dark, but it made sense. "Order your men to unhand me or that is what I will tell my Prince."

Alvaron's eyes narrowed. "Is that how you choose to fight then? You will tell him nothing in the sewers, lad." The grip around his tunic tightened. "Captain, take your men and throw him into the nearest grate."

Jaylin's stomach lurched with the thought. He had always been able to talk his way through trouble before. The Mark's eyes were intense – he was not a man to reason with.

"You don't want to do this," Jaylin said.

"Believe me, I very much do. I've always wanted to throw an arrogant Espion into the sewers. You'll have to do. Take him outside."

Rage surged inside of Jaylin. It surprised him how quickly he could come to hate someone. The chance to impress Jevin. The chance to win the king's favor. There wasn't time to be delayed by the sewers. Alvaron was jeopardizing everything he hoped to accomplish with the case. His suspicions about Kalisha's association with Alvaron were already confirmed, and that would not be difficult to prove to anyone.

But what if they found Kalisha before he made it out of the sewers?

"You have no right to throw me into the sewers, Alvaron. I've broken no law. I am here on the King's Will. What you are doing is treason. Do not think for a moment you can get away with this…"

Defiance had worked with Lady Minya. It didn't with the Mark of Alvaron. The nobleman's jeweled fist shot at Jaylin's face. The stinging blow rocked his head backwards. The men clenched his arms as a jagged jewel cut into his face, tearing his cheek.

Jaylin felt his head loll and dizziness washed over him. But he managed to raise his eyes and glare at Alvaron with all the hatred he felt, before kicking the Mark in the stomach.

If I'm going into the sewers, by Aster I'll deserve it.

Shouts of outrage thundered with the blood in his ears. They beat him senseless. The last thing he heard was the Mark above him, ordering that the legion sheriffs drag him to the nearest grate and toss him into the sewers. "Brand him," the nobleman said and Jaylin felt himself towed to the front door.

"Take two men and follow them. Be sure he goes in, Captain. Then report back to me at the Palace when it is done."

"I will, my lord. The wretch will wish he'd never touched you."

"And Captain," Alvaron added with a contemptuous barb in his voice. "Be sure he feels that circle."

To be continued in the February 2003 issue of Deep Magic...

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